GODFREY E. TURTON

THERE WAS ONCE A CITY

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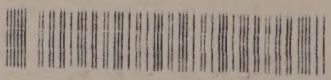

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THERE WAS ONCE A CITY

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GODFREY E. TURTON

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"IT is told how that City increased in sin and pride, until there arose a Queen more wicked even than her fathers, whose godlessness and abominations made Heaven itself to shudder. In her days the Devil came in person and dwelt in their midst. Then at last was the long-suffering of the Lord exhausted. In one night His judgment descended, and the waves of His wrath swept down the river to remove the offence from His sight, so that not one stone raised upon another should tell, Here was once a City. Only of that wicked Queen it is said that she perished not with the others in the flood, for that the Devil did seize her and carry her down with him into the bowels of the earth."

425254

THERE
WAS ONCE A CITY

Chapter One

NOBODY KNEW WHERE THE TUNNEL led except the Queen. But the city pursued its business contentedly without the knowledge. It was rather a beautiful city. That it had to be. The great river set a high standard in beauty, and would allow nothing inferior upon its banks. But this city was allowed upon both, which was no mean tribute from so keen a critic of æsthetic excellence. Down either shore swept the proud array of buildings, and even the wildest floods approved and left them untouched.

The Aella was no ordinary river. It had the artistic temperament. In some humours it would remove entire centres of commerce from its banks, suddenly considering them unsightly.

Others which it had cherished for a season, it would incontinently desert, striking out a new channel with all the ardour of a pioneer. The Aella was undoubtedly feminine and a deplorable coquette. Most rivers endowed with its matronly proportions acquire with them a measure of matronly gravity. But the Aella in spirit was always the slim young thing that romped down from her native hills. It forgot that when rivers grow up romps become catastrophic. The Aella had not grown up. It was a young girl armed with a steam-roller, exercising her new toy with a delighted and often disastrous inconsequence. There was an admirable statue opposite the tunnel, representing the river-spirit in her eternal youth, where on a rock of white marble she offered to the wanton air the fresh, pure lines of her body, kneeling and looking up with a smile half mocking and wholly provocative.

The tunnel was on the right bank, where the cliff rose sheer, and only by means of steep little stairways could the city climb and twist up its precipitous face. On the other shore lay the business quarters. There, too, perhaps were the finer buildings. It is difficult to erect an architectural masterpiece on a gradient of one in five. But above the high cliff stood the Royal Palace. At evening from the bridge it seemed to hang in a glow of pink mist, through which peered spires and towers, while beneath his feet in the hurrying water the passer-by could distinguish a rippling reflection of the blush that had overspread the sky at its contact. The main road to the Palace led across this bridge, then turned sharply aside to zigzag up the hill. Straight ahead gaped the tunnel. But no one knew where that led except the Queen.

Herr Kraut was not one of the Kiralyi. Very

few were who lived on the left bank. They pretended that they did not care. They pointed out what a small contingent the Kiralyi formed in the city, and the manifest advantages of belonging to the majority. In this humour they would forget to consider how the advantages were discounted when the minority held all the power. In other humours they would enlarge upon the oppression they suffered. Yet they were rich and well fatted. Flesh seemed to sprout naturally upon the left bank. Apparently they throve under the yoke. But they hated the Kiralyi and the river. In their honest sedentary lives both were disturbing influences, strong, restless, and idle. The Aella would brook no nonsense about commercial navigation. She was a past mistress in under-currents.

The city was very gay at night when the young men sought relaxation after the strain of business hours. One amused oneself in lurid es-

tablishments guarded by bemedalled commissionaires, from which issued the sound of music and riotous living. If one was very daring, one patronized those whose entrances led down a steep flight of stairs from the street. All the young men of the left bank were extremely daring. Herr Kraut knew this. His establishment led from a side street down two flights of stairs. One amused oneself nightly "chez Kraut." It was very fashionable and very expensive.

Many foreigners came to the city both on business and pleasure. They usually stayed on the left bank. The houses on the right were poor and squalid till one approached the summit, where were the mansions of the Kiralyi and the Palace. There were no hotels on the right bank. The foreigners used to make judicious inquiries of their hotel-keepers where they would be likely to meet the best society of the city. The hotel-keepers

always recommended them to spend the evening " chez Kraut." Herr Kraut catered largely for foreigners. In his establishment were many young women who did not consider the absence of an introduction an insurmountable bar to converse with the opposite sex. Herr Kraut had these young women taught a variety of foreign languages.

George Passmore was disappointed when the cloak-room attendant greeted him in his native tongue. Such a salutation seemed incongruous in the haunt of crime and vice which Herr Kraut's carefully constructed entrance so plainly foreshadowed. Besides, he prided himself on his knowledge of the language of the city, in which, of course, he took care to frame his reply. That night a representative galaxy of the city's élite had assembled " chez Kraut." Daring young men were dancing with the less exclusive young

women. Passmore leant against the bar counter, and rested his courage after the strain of entering the place. Besides, he did not know how to gauge the extent of the young women's emancipation. The problem was solved for him by the least attractive. She had not found the males "chez Kraut" responsive hitherto. Passmore considered that much can be forgiven to the pear which falls into one's mouth.

No very exalted standard of dancing was demanded "chez Kraut." The young women learnt not to be exacting. But there was a custom that their long-suffering should be rewarded afterwards by refreshment at their partner's expense. Such refreshment was needed in inverse proportion to the partner's prowess. George Passmore found that his dancing had necessitated a quite surprising consumption of the city's least inexpensive wines. Nor even with such apparently

could the memory be entirely effaced. He was given gently to understand that the shock required a monetary as well as a liquid medicament. As the bar was empty he ventured to remonstrate. Unfortunately another of Herr Kraut's protégées chose this moment to enter. Lulu promptly joined forces with Marica. (Their respective names became evident in the course of a heated argument.) Lulu was a dark-skinned lady of ripe charms not unadorned, who bore the distinctive features of the dwellers upon the left bank. Gold proved balm to the wounded souls of both. Marica even expressed herself willing to take the floor again. But before the first encore she seemed to regret her rashness, and demanded a halt. Round the room with careful provision Herr Kraut had had tables tastefully arranged. Here his wealthier clients could sit and sip the champagne that under such circumstances was

de rigueur. To one of these Passmore found himself led.

" I'm so tired," said Marica.

" We might go to the bar," he suggested tentatively.

" There are no chairs," she replied.

Only when they were actually seated and the indispensable bottle had been whisked before them, did an obvious parry occur to his brain. He made a hasty calculation of the sum in which he was already involved, and comforted himself that at least Marica must be thinking him generous. Her good opinion might be worth the horrifying total he envisaged, although her personal appearance certainly was not. Anyhow he would never come again.

He felt that he ought to make conversation. The complete roué has a ready flow of words. He did not wish to lose that good opinion for which

he had already paid cash. He began with scathing comments upon persons present, but she did not appear amused. Perhaps the persons were her intimate friends. He tried to put himself into her position, to discover what subjects would interest her. She would probably enjoy talking scandal about her employer.

" Tell me about Herr Kraut," he began.

" Herr Kraut is very kind. He is a good comrade to me."

This was unsatisfactory.

" I don't want to hear that. Tell me something that you really think — something bad about him."

" I never say bad things about anyone."

Luckily a cabaret attraction intervened. Passmore decided that it was remarkably hard work winning the good opinion of the young women " chez Kraut."

During the performance of the contortionist he remembered that he had not put his arm round her waist. He remedied the oversight. The contortionist was succeeded by an acrobatic spectacle unaccompanied by music. It appeared necessary that conversation should be resumed.

" Tell me about that man," he asked, pointing to an unexciting individual then balancing upon his hands.

" Alphonse! He is a good comrade to me."

" And that? "

" Achille. He, too, is a good comrade."

" You say everybody is a good comrade."

" To me everybody is."

A compliment seemed indicated, but failed to materialize in his brain. He remembered too late that he might have supplied the deficiency with a squeeze. He wondered whether, if he did

425254

it now, she would appreciate the connexion, but decided that the opportunity had passed.

There was a pause.

" Is Lulu also a good comrade? "

Marica sighed. " Poor Lulu! " she said.

" Why poor Lulu? "

" She may lose one she loves."

Visions of an unhappy bereavement in the Lulu family flashed across his mind.

" Her grandson? " he suggested slyly, then, abashed by Marica's unaltered solemnity, corrected himself hysterically to " son-in-law."

She did not smile.

" Lulu hopes to be married soon," she explained, " if all goes well."

He concealed his surprise.

" Lulu is to be congratulated. But why shouldn't all go well? "

He felt that from the prospective husband's

point of view there was abundant reason. Looking up, he noticed that Lulu herself was standing near them.

" You will not be angry if I give Lulu something to drink? " Marica asked. " She is very thirsty."

The bottle proved to be empty, but almost before this fact became evident its successor had inexorably appeared.

Lulu sat down at their table and filled her glass. Passmore was silent. He found it difficult to combine conversation with mental arithmetic. The city had a most intricate system of coinage. But for once Marica deigned to take the initiative herself.

" Lulu, this is my very good friend. I am going to tell him everything."

The rest of the ladies' conversation was carried on in the language of the city. Passmore

found that his knowledge was less advanced than he had supposed. He gathered from the few words he caught that he himself was the subject of their conference. Sometimes he suspected that the allusions were not entirely flattering. But he comforted himself that self-consciousness is apt to imagine such things. The remarks that we do not hear or understand we quite groundlessly believe to be made at our expense.

At last Marica turned to him. " Lulu says that I may tell you. She says she can trust you."

" That is very good of Lulu."

" Yesterday Lulu promised to marry the Grand Duke Rupert."

Passmore blinked unenlightenedly.

" He does not understand," put in Lulu. " I will tell him myself. My friend," she said to Passmore, " you do not know because you are a foreigner. The Grand Duke Rupert is the Queen's

cousin and heir to the throne. But he is a good democrat. He often comes here, because he loves the people, and is not proud like the other Kiralyi or the Queen."

" Does the Queen never come here? "

Lulu laughed. " The Queen does not like us. But the Grand Duke Rupert is different. Yesterday he asked me to marry him. You are shocked that a grand duke should want to marry a poor girl like me? "

" Not at all. In our country we are all democratic. A grand duke could marry whom he liked."

" Here it is not so. They will try to separate us. A poor girl is not fit for one of the Kiralyi."

"What a shame! But if the Grand Duke loves you he'll find a way out of the difficulty."

" You do not understand our city. No one dares disobey the Kiralyi or the Queen."

" But they must know that he's been — well, paying you attentions."

" Not yet. He has lived apart from them in a private house here on the left bank. He does not love those on the right bank. But he must go to the ball to-morrow night. There he will meet the Queen and tell her everything. It is right that she should know."

" She will be very angry," put in Marica. " The Queen is not good to deal with when she is angry."

" I'm going to the ball myself," he remarked.

Lulu and Marica seemed alarmed.

" You are a guest of the Kiralyi? " they asked.

" No, I have a friend at our Legation who's taking me. You needn't be frightened. I'm entirely on your side."

" If he's going to the ball —" began Lulu, and stopped.

Marica had shaken her head contemptuously.

Passmore suddenly envisaged himself as the central figure of a political conspiracy.

" Couldn't I do anything for you? " he asked eagerly.

There followed a protracted interchange of unintelligibilities between Lulu and Marica. Passmore's confidence in his linguistic attainments lay shattered; but, translating their gestures, he was able to guess the drift of the conversation. He was not surprised therefore when Lulu turned to him.

" Will you help us, my friend? " she asked.

" Gladly. Only tell me how."

He was determined to show them he was not the nonentity they supposed, or that he supposed they supposed.

" Then, please watch the Queen and Rupert, and tell me everything you see. I have no other friend at the ball."

" Will a poor foreigner like myself be much use? "

" You are so clever," said Marica.

" But I don't know either by sight."

" Lulu can describe the Grand Duke."

Lulu laughed. " You must remember that I am in love. But he is tall and handsome."

" Old? "

" Oh, no — young."

" How young? "

" It is rude to ask ages. Perhaps he is thirty. He is older than I am."

" Naturally," he agreed, but with a mental reservation as he glanced at the Grand Duke's prospective mate.

" You will do this? " she asked.

"Of course. But how shall I know the Queen?"

"One does not mistake the Queen."

"Why? Is she so alarming?"

"It is not alarm that she inspires."

"Well, what is the sensation?"

"What do men generally feel with a young girl of nineteen?"

"Do you mean to say the Queen's only nineteen? How absurd!"

"She can be a very wilful and cruel absurdity," remarked Marica.

Passmore walked home alone, reflecting what a deliciously abandoned evening he had spent. The same thought did not occur to his two companions in abandonment.

Chapter Two

PASSMORE STOOD TALKING TO HIS friend from the Legation. The Kiralyi Ball was rather a terrifying affair for the foreigner. He was appalled to discover how many people existed in the world whom he did not know, how many words which he could not understand.

Arthur Crawford was not exactly an accredited diplomat. He himself would have found it hard to define his position. His precise business in the city had somehow never been stated, and now that he had lived there nearly two months loosely attached to the Legation no one took the trouble to inquire. The city seldom asked questions. It preferred to speculate upon rather than to solve its enigmas. Only at the Legation his busi-

ness must have been known. He moved there as of right. But that was his characteristic talent. He could appear indigenous to the most exotic *mise en scène*.

Passmore regarded him as a mine of information.

" I can strongly recommend the ceremony when the really big people arrive," Crawford was saying. " You'll see nothing like it anywhere else."

" Who'll be here? "

" Oh, all the Kiralyi and the Queen and the Grand Duke."

" Yes, I heard he was coming. Tell me about the Queen."

The other frowned, glancing furtively round at the gay throng which brimmed the *salon*. No one seemed to be paying them the least attention.

" She's quite delightful. What do you want

to know? " Then, forestalling any possible answer to his question, " If you're bored with waiting, I'll tell you a fairy story. Come and sit down."

Passmore wondered if he was expected to scoff. Somehow he decided that he was not.

They sat on an empty sofa against the wall. In their ears buzzed the chatter of a strange tongue, where uniform and gorgeous dress passed and repassed, saluting, bowing, and kissing each other's hand. The great world of the city had assembled in force to-night, and were taking a leisurely greeting before the ceremony began.

" The heroine is the river," Crawford announced. " I love telling this story. Sometimes I believe it.

" It isn't really a river. It's a nymph. You can see her, if you cross the chain bridge opposite the tunnel. The first of the Kiralyi built that tunnel. He built it from the other side. It brought

him out here, and he met Aella. She was kneeling on the bank, just as she is kneeling now, and waiting to be kissed. Because she was lovelier than any other river-nymph she wanted to be seen by men. Her sister nymphs had warned her. They always kept themselves hidden. But they were less beautiful, so they couldn't understand. Yet they had good cause to warn her. When a river-nymph gives herself to mortals, she must give not only her body but her soul. Ever since that day the Aella has been the slave of mankind. Her beauty is condemned to drudge at their mills, wash their towns, and carry their slops and refuse. She makes a very capricious and disobedient slave, but she has never regained her freedom. Only once in a hundred years her spirit enters into the form of one of the Kiralyi, her children, that she may seek her deliverer. It is said that she will win deliverance through the same beauty that

wrought her fall. The child in whom she is born has her own image." He stopped. "That's all," he said.

"You mean — " began Passmore.

"I mean nothing. If you want to understand a people you should know their legends."

They were interrupted by a sudden burst of music. The throng parted to right and left, leaving a clear pathway from the doors to the dais at the end of the room. Passmore and his friend rose and took up a position in the crowd, from which, looking over the heads of those in front, they could watch the approaching procession.

As the music swelled, there appeared a line of gentlemen-in-waiting, on whose breasts gay ribbons and medals relieved the sombre effect of evening dress. Each carried a great staff surmounted with a bouquet of anemones, the royal flower.

They lined the channel, up which two men

were now advancing. One was old but erect. He wore his short white beard carefully trimmed, and carried himself with the air of a man of action. The simple military virtues promised by his firm mouth and severe features were half belied by an expression of anything but simplicity which lurked in his eyes. One scented the politician, and suspected an inexhaustible capacity for jettisoning scruples. His companion was younger. It seemed not unlikely that these two were father and son. But the young man walked despondently with his eyes cast to the ground. From time to time he would return the salute of some friend in the crowd, but his face soon relapsed into its former settled melancholy.

Passmore rose on tiptoe for a better view. He guessed that he was looking at Lulu's lover.

"Who is Rupert's companion?" he asked.

The other grunted irritably. "His father,

the Grand Duke Ferdinand. Don't you know the Prime Minister?"

"I never realized what a family affair this Government was."

Crawford did not answer.

When the royal guests had been escorted to a place on the dais, their ushers returned, and the music ceased. But as fresh dignitaries arrived, it broke out afresh, varying the air for each occasion. At last nearly ten persons had assembled.

Then once more the doors were flung wide, and now the National Anthem pealed forth. Standing stiffly to attention with the crowd, Passmore, who was tall, had a clear view of all that passed. First came the staff-bearers in double force, walking backwards to face the sovereign. Then a solitary figure. She walked with an air of conscious but unrepented transgression, less deprecating than exulting, as though every line and

curve of her slim body was a crime which feared and yet sought the light of day. But in her great grey-blue eyes showed no fear, only a tranquillity that sparkled like sunlight over an unfathomed pool.

As she advanced, the two walls of her pathway swayed towards her, betraying the effort of their component parts to reconcile a natural human instinct with the stiff posture that ceremony prescribed. In some places the way became so narrow that the line-keepers could almost feel against their cheeks stray strands of the deep-toned yellow hair, too fine to be imprisoned in the knot concealed in the curve above her neck. They did not appear unnecessarily eager to widen the channel.

The guests already assembled rose respectfully as the Queen approached the dais. There seemed something incongruous in their respect.

There was an atmosphere about the Queen suggesting ideas hardly compatible with the magnificent dowagers now curtsying before her. Perhaps the effect was enhanced by that impression of strangely intensified nakedness which an evening dress gives to the body of a young girl. It was as though these dignified personages were assisting in some almost licentious cult of physical beauty.

She received their homage with a gesture wherein deference to their age seemed to melt into consciousness that such homage was due. There was always a fluidity about the moods and movements of the Queen, as of some river unable, perhaps unwilling, ever at one moment to rest the same. Now as she took her seat the loyalty of the crowd broke into intermittent cheers. Here and there, her name could be distinguished, " Aella, Aella, Queen Aella! "

" I didn't know the Queen's name was Aella too," said Passmore.

" Yes, she was christened after her ancestress, the river-nymph."

There was a custom in the city that every ball of State should open with the national dance. This is a slow, passionate measure, whose music is marked not so much by regularity of beat as by a rhythmic flow that seems to melt into the dancers and they into it and one another, absorbed in lingering and almost reluctant movement. It was danced only by the Kiralyi. The dwellers upon the left bank considered it needlessly sensual, realizing that the moral values can seldom with profit be treated light-heartedly. The primary passions are tiresome but necessary preliminaries to the acquisition of an enviably daring reputation. It is an irrelevancy to introduce them into the society of one's equals. Their proper sphere

is in places where one amuses oneself. But the national dance was seldom performed " chez Kraut." The emancipated young women did not find the daring young men very proficient. The daring young men thought that vice might well be pursued under some less exacting form. The Kiralyi did not aspire to be daring, but they delighted in the national dance. Their views on the primary passions were not those prevalent on the left bank.

The Queen danced the national dance extremely well. She demanded the same ability in her partner, and had little patience with indifferent performers. This was regrettable when the performer was a dignitary of high standing whom the Government wished to conciliate. It had been decided that such persons should not be invited to dance with the Queen until their prowess had been tested by a Committee of Examination.

At the upper end of the room a circle was formed by the ceremonial staff-bearers, within which royalty and high personages gave the opening dance. In old days it had been the custom for the sovereign's partner to be (according to sex) the senior prince or princess of the blood. The senior prince of the blood was seldom young. Often he danced extremely badly. The Queen had threatened to step down into the lower part of the room, and choose for herself the likeliest and most attractive young man. The difficulty had been solved by elevating a professional dancer to honorary royal rank. It was his duty to open balls with the Queen.

As the last notes died away and the circle broke up to allow room for the commonalty during the next dance, the Queen let herself be conducted back to the dais. All her senses felt inebriated with movement and sound. In this mood neither her body nor her soul was her own. She

turned with a radiant smile to her uncle, the old Grand Duke Ferdinand, when he sat down beside her; not that she was pleased to see him — she considered her uncle an outrageous bore — nor that she could ever tolerate bores, but she was caught up for the moment in an ecstasy of passionate self-surrender. The Grand Duke, being no expert in the analysis of her emotions, attributed the smile to his own personal charm, and was correspondingly gratified.

He was now a very old man. It was unlikely that he would survive to succeed his niece. For all practical purposes his son Rupert might be considered the heir, unless (as seemed not improbable) the Queen married and had children. He turned to her now with a troubled expression.

"Madam," he began, "I have a difficult subject to discuss."

The Queen waited.

" It relates to my son. It is not easy to discuss such things with a young girl."

She smiled encouragingly. The situation was becoming unexpectedly interesting.

" I like being corrupted," she said.

He looked pained. " I fear that I cannot gratify you. Nothing I say will be in the least likely to corrupt. My son Rupert has met a woman on the left bank whom he wishes to marry."

" Oh, but he can't. He's going to be King one day."

" He hopes in the happy event of your own marriage to be relieved of that high responsibility."

" I don't want to marry. I think I'll be a spinster."

Looking at her he reflected that she was not the material of which spinsters are made. She re-

fused to meet his eyes. She grew not unpleasantly conscious that a sudden heightening of her colour must be making her seem even more unmistakably nubile. Then she grew ashamed. It seemed almost indecent that the old man should guess such thoughts. She took refuge on the safer ground of family pride.

" Anyhow, he can't —— The Kiralyi don't mix with people from the left bank."

" On that point, Madam, we are agreed. It only remains to find some means of frustrating him."

" I forbid him."

" Will you tell him so yourself? "

" Certainly. But first I must hear everything about it."

" The details are hardly suited to your youth."

" My youth is my own business. Go on."

He shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly, but went on. He went on at such length that her attention began to wander. Half unconsciously she caught the eye of an entirely undistinguished person in the crowd. By some peculiar misfortune the Queen's eyes continually found themselves entangled in those of her human surroundings. Her uncle's narrative came to an abrupt close as his listener was led off to dance. There remained nothing more she needed to hear, although plenty that he wished to say. That, however, was often his plight.

The Grand Duke Rupert sat in a corner endeavouring to concentrate his thoughts upon Lulu. From time to time his eyes would wander over the feminine charms displayed so generously throughout the room. But such lapses from fidelity he regretted and would repress with a conscience-stricken severity.

Passmore also, as he passed him, felt dejected. Crawford had disappeared, and he knew no one here. At first he had hoped that, although debarred from dancing, he would find the ball sufficiently amusing merely to watch. Towards the early hours of the morning he realized that this was an error. He felt oppressively sleepy and ready to sink with fatigue from long standing. It was difficult to find an empty seat. When such occurred, it was usually one of a pair. The continued view of the unoccupied companion made him feel self-conscious. At the least hint of some couple's approach he would rise and wander away realizing bitterly that at a ball the only legitimate division of society is into bisexual dichotomies.

His self-respect returned at the sight of the Grand Duke. He remembered his own high political mission. At this distance he was able to

think even affectionately of Marica. At least she had come up and spoken to him herself. Rather naturally, no such initiative had been taken by any of the young women present to-night. He leant discreetly against a pillar where he could observe without being observed. After half an hour he began to tire of the Grand Duke's not unpleasing features.

The first he saw of the Queen was a length of highly creditable silk stocking, as she came down the short flight of stairs towards their corner. He was beginning to feel alarmed at the length, when appeared the hem of a light green dress.

The Grand Duke rose to meet her.

"May I have this dance?" he asked.

"No — I've come to talk. Let's sit down."

Passmore realized with a sudden pang that

he was going to understand remarkably little of what was said.

He was relieved by the Queen's next words, spoken in his own tongue.

" It's safer to talk like this. Otherwise people overhear things."

Rupert looked at her uneasily. " I'll speak any language you like, Aella."

" I hate doing it at a dance. You know what I want to say."

" I assure you I do not."

" You aren't very helpful —— Well, I forbid you to marry this girl from the left bank."

She stood up. It gave her an increased feeling of power. He followed her example. He was massively built. The comparison made their respective relations seem particularly ridiculous.

" I am, of course, your Majesty's humble slave, but at least I claim my heart as my own."

" You know that you can't. You belong to the Kiralyi."

" A great deal of humbug is talked about the family. If I had my way I should burn every house up here, and make the Kiralyi go and beg shelter on the left bank, or die in their pride."

She looked at him with her great eyes. Deep through the ocean of unnatural calm something dangerous and threatening seemed to be surging. He grew afraid. He was not entirely free from the superstitions of the city. They were particularly rife about the Queen.

At last she spoke. " Don't say that again, please."

He remained silent.

The Queen went on. " I honestly don't mind being a tyrant. You're not to marry that woman."

" Suppose I do? "

" Your relations-in-law may find you rather an expense."

" You mean that you'd make me a beggar? "

She smiled assentingly.

" But you can't. I am of the blood royal."

" I am the Queen."

She sat down and waited. He began to pace the floor.

" Look here, Aella. I'm sorry I lost my temper. I take back what I said. I understand how keen you are about the honour of the Kiralyi. Perhaps if I knew all that — " He stopped. There were things the Queen knew which it was comfortable to leave undiscussed. " I mean," he went on, " don't let's quarrel. Think of my feelings. I'm hopelessly in love with this girl."

He spoke with sincerity. Opposition had fanned the flame.

" You mayn't believe me, Rupert, but I'm honestly very sorry for you."

He sat nearer her. " I do believe, Aella. I knew you could never be tyrannical."

She tried unsuccessfully to appear more tyrant-like. But it was only too clear that she had been made for a very different purpose.

" I'd break my heart if I had to give up Lulu," he said.

She hesitated. Then: " But isn't there an obvious way out of the difficulty? "

" I wish there were."

" You might be a little less obtuse, Rupert. It's horribly embarrassing for me to explain."

He began to see light.

" Aella! " he cried, recoiling from her. " What a shocking suggestion for a young girl to make! "

She felt that she was now qualifying admirably as the villainess of a melodrama.

" I thought," she remarked, " that every one knew marriage isn't the only choice."

Her own knowledge dated from the conversation an hour back with Rupert's father. In spite of his indignant denial, the old Grand Duke's remarks had been eminently calculated to corrupt.

Rupert was looking at the Queen as at some devil in disguise. His mind ran on succubi and other feminine manifestations of the fiend.

"You are not fit to approach Lulu. You would pollute her."

"I promise that, as far as I am concerned, Lulu can remain permanently unpolluted."

She was relieved at the turn things were taking. It is easy and rather delightful to be cynical.

"This decides me," he cried. "I shall marry Lulu to-morrow."

"You'll have to charge it all to your future father-in-law. Is there a Papa Lulu? I don't think he'll be pleased."

" My wife may be marrying a pauper, but one day she will be a King's consort."

A variety of possible obstacles to this happy consummation occurred to the Queen, but she only mentioned one.

" It's dangerous to live apart from the rest of the Kiralyi. Things get decided in people's absences."

He winced. " Of course, Aella, you have the whip hand."

" Then you give her up? "

" You are blighting two young lives."

" You will stay here in the Palace till Lulu has left the country. It won't be long."

" At least I may write to her to say goodbye? "

" I'll write, but you shall sign the letter."

" What will it say? "

" The truth — that you fear she must have

misunderstood the meaning of your advances, that, of course, the Kiralyi can never choose their wives from the left bank, but that in any other capacity you will be delighted to receive her."

He grasped her arm in fury.

"I think that's almost high treason," she observed calmly, looking at the mark.

"I shall never sign that letter."

Her lips pouted expressively, conveying the consequences of such a refusal more eloquently than words.

"The whole atmosphere of this place is rotten with iniquity," he cried, "and I am caught in its meshes by the unhappy accident of my birth."

"You are rather entangled," she agreed. "Let's go back and dance. It's awful to think what a lot we've missed."

Mechanically he walked back with her into

the room. As he put his arm round her waist and felt her against him, he could not help reflecting that compensations might exist even for the loss of Lulu. But at present he did not wish to think of compensations. They undermine the luxury of grief. Besides, he was wondering how Lulu would regard him when she received that letter.

Passmore had listened in growing agony to the latter half of the conversation. He had not dared to move a muscle for fear that the slightest sound might betray. At last he could stretch his cramped limbs. Then he sped towards the outer door. He had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Hailing a taxi he bade the man drive " chez Kraut."

Chapter Three

THE KÀVÈHÀZ WAS BUILT ON THE left bank of the river. Its great windows looked straight down on the water and across at the rock where stood the Queen's palace. So distinguished a view compensated for any loss of prestige occasioned by its less aristocratic site. Even among the Kiralyi it was fashionable to dine at the Kávéház. One met there about half-past nine. The city was late in everything that it did. After dinner one danced or talked scandal according to age and taste. In either case one appreciated the peculiarly penetrating tunelessness of the native band, which served equally to cloak excesses of foot or tongue.

Society in the Kávéház was rather mixed.

The population of the city was strangely cosmopolitan, especially on the left bank. Rich merchants met here and transacted international affairs. Mysterious strangers appeared and disappeared on unknown intent. Provided that their payments were definite their business was by common consent left undefined. The mysterious strangers gladly paid exorbitant bills at the Kávéház. The Kiralyi did not pay such bills. They had a private arrangement with the proprietor, who knew the value of their custom. The Kiralyi possessed few sources of income. It seemed ungracious not to exploit to its utmost monetary capacity that high birth in bestowing which Providence had apparently exhausted His generosity towards them.

Baron Zsido came of humble stock from the left bank. But his marriage with a beautiful if impoverished member of the Kiralyi had, by

exalting his aspirations, necessitated the prefix he now bore. The lady did not escape blame for her social imprudence. Nor had she secured an especially young or handsome mate. But the Baron brought her the glitter of commercial laurels. The Zsido millions had not only reinstated her in her accustomed sphere, but had borne the weight of elevating her husband thither too.

A corner table at the Kávéház was permanently reserved for the Baroness Zsido and party. On the night of the Kiralyi ball it was well filled. Neither the Baroness nor her husband had received an invitation from Court.

The Baron lay back and contentedly sipped his wine. He appeared lost in thought, and took no part in the conversation around him. His face hung motionless, only from time to time a tremor disturbed the crevices of his multitudinous chins marking the inward passage of the liquor. He

was a short little man, whose head seemed strangely imbedded into his body, as though excessive corpulence had so padded the shoulders that their level now obscured his neck. His meditations were respected by his guests. The Baron was leader of the parliamentary opposition. He had no doubt much to occupy his thoughts. He had also to digest a considerable dinner.

The Baroness smiled welcomingly at Crawford when he appeared. She was genuinely pleased to see him. He brought with him that indefinable suggestion of a wider world which clings to the man who has travelled and accomplished much. She felt oppressed by the sameness of the company in which she had been talking.

"I thought you were never coming, Arthur," she said.

"Forgive me, Baroness. But it was difficult

to slip away from the ball," and he shook hands with the Baron and the guests.

" I don't know why you need have gone. I find these great formal affairs so dull."

" Diplomatic duty. The Legation was invited," and he smiled.

" Don't talk nonsense. Come and sit down by me. I want to be amused."

" That was unnecessary," remarked the cavalier who had hitherto been attempting to fulfil the task.

" Oh, you, Paul! Surely you never imagined you were doing so? "

Paul sank back lightly upon the cushions of his vanity. His smooth exterior was impervious to attack.

" Marie requires to be petted, but with variety," growled the Baron banteringly.

His wife pouted.

" You speak as though I were a toy," she complained.

" That is a compliment," declared Crawford. " I like to think of woman as an *objet de vertu* to be treasured and delicately admired."

" I find the upkeep of such *objets de vertu* a trifle expensive," the Baron remarked.

" Béla is thinking of my dress. You can't imagine what difficulty I had to make him buy it this afternoon."

" How unreasonable! " exclaimed Paul, winking at the Baron.

" He must be congratulating himself now on his afternoon's defeat," said Crawford.

Her husband grunted. " Mr. Crawford, when my wife allows it, I have some serious business to discuss with you."

Crawford bowed. " Is it permitted, Baroness? " he asked.

" It is not. Béla must wait. Do you know, Arthur, that I've been looking forward to seeing you the whole time these men were talking? You can't run away from me at once."

" On the contrary, I have run away to be with you. I braved all the social anathemas for your sake, and left the ball before the Queen."

" Every one does now. That rule ought to be abolished. The Queen stays to so insanely late an hour."

" Like yourself, she enjoys dancing."

" I don't enjoy it. Persons of immature years and tastes should be excluded from the throne."

" Dear me, Marie," put in Paul, " we seem to be talking treason."

" I'm talking it with Arthur, not with you. Go and tell the Queen if you like. At this moment you'll find her in the darkest available corner sitting out with her newest romance."

Crawford laughed. " Conversation with you becomes highly dangerous. Please remember that I must be impartial."

" Very well. You can tell me everything that happened at the ball as impartially as you choose."

" Really, it seemed like any other ball. I left early, and while I was there I was looking after a young friend of mine."

" Masculine or feminine? "

" Only one of my friends is feminine. This was a young countryman of mine, George Passmore."

" You must bring him to see me. I love the fresh young boys your country produces. What did Mr. Passmore think of the Queen? "

" He didn't say. No doubt he is reserving judgment till he meets the Baroness Zsido."

" Arthur! My husband is listening."

" I'm not," said the Baron.

" Well, you ought. Arthur is paying me compliments."

The Baron did not appear greatly perturbed.

" As soon as he's finished, perhaps you'll allow him to attend to more serious affairs."

" Don't be impatient, Béla. I want a full description of Mr. Passmore first."

Crawford laughed. " There's not much to tell. He has imagination. He liked the fairy story about the Aella."

" You tell every one that. I think you really believe it."

Paul's attention had been diverted. The Baron was dozing again lethargically.

" Don't you? " asked Crawford.

She looked up, startled.

" I'm not a bit superstitious — at least, not here," and she glanced round the room.

Dancing had ceased for the moment, and the band were playing softly to themselves a sad melody, that had grown upon the lonely plains by the river-side. Over the empty floor fell a network of shadows from the little shaded lamps on the tables round the walls. She began to wonder whether superstition was really so utterly incompatible with this place. She felt strangely alone with Crawford.

"It's a very pretty legend," she went on, "and of course I'm myself one of the Kiralyi."

"Then you believe?"

"That's absurd, but you know what people think about the Queen — only uneducated people, of course."

"They love her."

"Perhaps, but they fear her. You've heard what they say. It's stupid, but so is our custom

that only a reigning monarch may enter the tunnel. Naturally one invents stories."

"Do tell me, as an ignorant foreigner, where the tunnel actually does lead."

"I honestly don't know. No one does but the Queen. Probably nowhere. What does it matter?"

"You're a strange city. Has no one ever tried to explore?"

She shook her head. "I suppose at the bottom of our hearts we believe — or if we don't, we aren't interested."

"And hasn't the Queen told?"

"The Queen tells nothing."

They were interrupted by a young man from a neighbouring table, who came up and shook hands gravely all round. It was a peculiarity of the Kávéház that every one there appeared mutually acquainted. Acquaintanceship gener-

ated spontaneously in the city. One never got to know, one always knew.

" Shall we dance a little? " he asked.

The band were once more harnessing their temperament to the restricting measure of a fox-trot.

" Arthur would be grateful if we did," she replied. " I know he's longing to talk over some horribly serious matter with Béla."

" Then he will perhaps forgive me for removing so charming a distraction."

Crawford smiled. " Not even my business with the Baron could be as serious as the conversation I've just had with his wife."

" What were you discussing? "

" Don't laugh, François," said the Baroness. " We've been making each other feel deliciously creepy."

" Is that possible in the Kávéház? "

" Yes, we were talking about the Queen and the tunnel."

He winced. " It is better to dance than to be serious here."

" I agree," said Crawford. " Legend here is too intertwined with politics."

" You know the Aella legend, François? "

He bowed. " Let's dance, Baroness. Mr. Crawford will excuse me."

François des Tenèbres was one of those young men whom everybody knew, but of whom nothing was known. It was impossible to say when he had actually materialized in the city. There was only a date when as yet he was not, and a date shortly subsequent when he had always been. Since he possessed every manifestation of the most excellent antecedents, it seemed immaterial whether or not they really existed. No one took his *nom de voyage* very seriously. He be-

came François to every shade of society, by all of whom he had been unhesitatingly accepted. Amid the political feuds that rent the city he maintained the impartiality permitted to a foreigner. Only it might have been remarked that always after the periodic storms in which these indulged François des Tenèbres was to be met returning from the Palace.

Crawford went over and sat down next the Baron. They had the table to themselves for the moment, while everybody was dancing.

" Well, it's settled," he said, taking a cigar from the proffered case.

" Your Government is wise," growled Zsido, and he smoked on in silence.

Crawford waited patiently, profiting by the respite to grade mentally each successive feminine delightfulness that swayed past him in an alien embrace. He kept professional matters in

a watertight compartment separate from his soul. It was a compartment from which he was often glad to escape.

"And what's your price?" his companion asked at last. "I can pay."

"My Government does not take money —"

"Oh, cut that."

"I was going to say that, though my Government does not take money, it naturally does not act out of charity. I shall speak to you perfectly frankly. This present regime is a danger to international finance. We cannot afford to expose our numerous investments in your city to the caprices of an irresponsible girl. You are a business man, and can appreciate a purely business alliance. For the moment our interests are the same. My Government wishes to see in power some party who can stay the financial ruin,

which the Queen and the Kiralyi are bringing on the city. We believe that you, Baron, lead such a party. As long as it serves our advantage we are willing to help you. But if we could see any cheaper and less dangerous method of attaining our end we should desert you without scruple. This is a purely business understanding."

"Mr. Crawford, you speak with sense."

"Don't praise me. I am merely the mouthpiece of my Government. Personally, I'm head over ears in love with the Queen."

The Baron favoured him with a quick, suspicious glance, but otherwise ignored the remark.

"Foreign help alone will never win this city," he said at last.

"That is your affair."

"It is also yours. You would find prolonged civil disturbances highly unremunerative."

" Then shall I advise my Government not to interfere? "

" Mr. Crawford, I am being as frank with you as you have lately been with me. Neither I nor the party I represent will consent to become the tools of a foreign power. Foreign troops may be necessary for the success of our *coup d'état*, but once established we intend to be free and independent agents. Only, as our Government will consist of solid men with a substantial monetary stake in the country, you may rest assured that our interests must coincide with yours in the restoration of the national credit.

" But do you imagine that your regime can survive the day when you dismiss our troops? "

" Yes, if the people are with us."

" They are not with you. They adore the Queen."

" Their adoration is curiously mingled with an incipient horror. My dear sir, a foreigner like yourself, mixing with the upper classes, sees only the cultured veneer of this city. You cannot realize the semi-oriental superstition of the masses."

Crawford smiled. " I seem to have heard some of their legends. But I fail to understand how these can help your cause."

" I shall tell you. Those legends owe their revival to the work of my agents."

" Oh, but they're as old as sin," Crawford interrupted.

" Even sin, Mr. Crawford, may occasionally welcome a little propaganda. They have acquired a highly distinctive flavour in my hands. The people believed that the Queen's ancestress was a fairy; I have taught them that that fairy's descendant is a witch."

" Really, Baron, isn't this rather childish? "

The other winked. " When I was a child I walked as a child, I thought as a child. These people are children. They must be baited with childish things. The soil was not unfertile. There is already a cauldron of superstitious horror seething in this city ready to smoke out the nest of the Kiralyi and their Queen."

" I never realized you were a poet, Baron," remarked Crawford.

His companion's exterior hardly suggested an Ariel.

" My poetry is printed not in words but in deeds. It will bring that wanton girl down to the dung-heap which is her home." He spoke with a sudden bitterness. Baron Zsido had no cause to love the governing minority. " No," he went on, " you and I, Mr. Crawford, are not to be deluded by silly stories of diabolic pacts, but we can discern the germ of truth in popular fal-

lacies. Sober history shows only too well the teaching that the daughters of her family receive."

"Baron Zsido, I am paid by my Government to support you, and must obey without regard to my private judgment. Only I ask you to exclude moral questions entirely from our conversation."

"We have not all been favoured with your diplomatic training. The common man like myself finds it hard not to betray a natural squeamishness in certain matters."

"Very well. I have spoken so far as the mouthpiece of a foreign power. You shall now hear my personal opinion. I think the Queen is the purest, and most beautiful, and most delightful girl it has ever been my fortune to meet, and I would sell my soul far more effectually than your agents pretend that she has done if I could

make it my duty to protect instead of attack her."

"And claim a very different payment, I dare say?"

"You know I mayn't quarrel with you."

"I am aware of that, Mr. Crawford. Our bond is one of mutual expediency."

"Apparently we understand each other."

"Yet can you blame me if I desire some more stable prop than the expediency of my dear friends oversea, and find it in the superstitions of the common people?"

The music had ceased and the table refilled.

"Well, have you two old fogies quite finished your confabulation?" asked the Baroness.

"We found the city's legends too fertile a subject to be abandoned," said Crawford.

"And where have you decided that the tunnel leads?" asked Paul.

" The Baron suspected a cul-de-sac; but I insisted upon an outlet either into fairyland or the urban drainage system."

In a place like the Kávéház a novice was easily recognizable from his step and bearing. Passmore tried to conceal his self-consciousness under a mask of defiance as he walked across the empty floor.

Crawford rose surprised. " Hallo! " he exclaimed. " I thought you were still at the ball."

" And I certainly never expected to meet you here."

" Well, come and be introduced to every one. Baroness, this is my friend, Mr. Passmore, of whom I spoke."

" Fortune is kind to-night," she declared graciously, " and is making the Kiralyi ball give up all its treasures to me. Did you arrange this pleasant little surprise, Arthur? "

" I am afraid," said Passmore, " I've come

rather on business than pleasure. I have an urgent private message for Baron Zsido."

The Baroness looked displeased. " More business! " she exclaimed. " Why couldn't you have waited till to-morrow, Mr. Passmore? "

Her husband heaved himself out of his chair. " Well, where do you want to speak to me? " he growled.

Passmore fidgeted uncomfortably. " I have a companion outside. If you will see her, she could explain better than I."

" Who is this mysterious 'she'? " whispered Paul to the Baroness in an audible aside. " Will you allow it, Marie? "

" Oh, I never interfere. You'd better go, Béla."

A prolonged and embarrassing silence followed their departure. François rose to take his leave.

" But every one is deserting me," cried the Baroness. " Must you really? "

" Forgive me. I have an appointment."

" With the Baron's unknown admirer? " asked Paul.

" I am sorry, Baroness, to break up your party," continued François.

" I must see you to-morrow," she said. " Can you come to lunch? "

" I shall be delighted," and he kissed her hand.

* * *

" I think I should avoid broadcasting this," remarked Crawford, as he walked home with Passmore along the river-front.

" Of course, but wasn't it a dreadful thing for a young girl to suggest! "

Crawford did not reply.

" Anyhow," continued Passmore, " Lulu

seems to think that Baron Zsido will make full use of the information."

"Yes, it will not do the Queen any good."

Day was already breaking, and a soft blue transfused the sky shining through the fading grey of night. The houses on the right bank, which darkness had converted into twinkling stars, now resumed their proper forms. Only on the hill-top from a high window of the Palace a single light defied the dawn. It glowed strangely red, seeming to proceed at this hour from a source hardly human. Passmore shuddered. He pictured it as the soul of the Kiralyi, drunken with blood and the weight of some unearthly sin.

Chapter Four

"'THE QUEEN WAS IN HER PARLOUR eating bread and honey,'" quoted François, as he entered.

"Have some," she replied. "I'm frightfully hungry. I didn't get any supper."

He sat down beside her on the window-seat.

"As a matter of fact," she went on, "it's my bedroom, and you oughtn't to be here. There'd be special editions, if the papers knew."

"But you sent for me."

"Don't be silly. How could I?"

He shrugged his shoulders, but glanced at a curious figure drawn on the floor in chalk.

She got up and readjusted the carpet.

"Let's say I wanted to ask your advice awfully badly, and by a lucky chance you came."

He bowed. "Lucky chances may be dangerous," he said. "You don't mind me warning you?"

"Why dangerous?"

He did not answer.

"You mean it puts me into your power?"

"Aella," he exclaimed, "I don't want that. I want you to give yourself to me of your own free will."

She did not meet his eyes. "I don't love you, François."

"Is it because —"

"No, of course not. You know enough to understand why I could never mind that."

"Aella, I must ask one thing. Is it because you — love someone else?"

She shook her head, and they sat silent.

A light dawn breeze played in through the open window and caressed her bare neck and arms. She still wore the dress in which she had danced.

" Don't you feel cold? " he asked.

" François," she said suddenly, " I don't love anyone. I don't think I ever can. You see, I'm not really a person yet. I like being liked, and I like doing things I like. I do everything because it's easy and pleasant, never because there's a real I making myself do it. If you loved me, you'd be loving someone who was really just nobody."

" Beauty can never be just nothing."

" I'm not beautiful."

" Don't be merely absurd."

" Anyhow, you couldn't love anyone for that alone."

" I've never thought I could."

" So it's no good loving me."

" Why did you send for me, Aella? "

" It's all rather silly. Rupert wants to marry a girl from the left bank. Well, he can't, you see."

" Describe her. Has she glossy black hair and bright red lips, quite phenomenally bright to the simple-minded considering her apparent age? "

" I've never met her. Why? "

" I could tell you better if you hadn't hurried me away at the critical moment. I was sitting at the Kávéház with the Zsido party, when the Baron suddenly received a message from a mysterious unknown, who wanted to speak to him."

" What did she say? "

" He went outside. I made an obvious excuse to leave, and gave her a good look as I passed

them in the hall. But I'm afraid I hadn't sufficient effrontery blatantly to walk up and eavesdrop."

"It's very funny. Rupert can't have told her, because — I took care he never left the ball."

"What can't Rupert have told? "

"That I forbade him to marry her."

He looked at her admiringly. "Were you alone with him when you said that? "

She nodded.

"You do talk the most utter nonsense, Aella, about doing things because they're easy and pleasant."

"Not really. Rupert's quite tame. Besides, I like seeming the complete villainess."

"How do you mean? "

"I made the obvious suggestion, and he stared at me as if I were a fiend."

"Perhaps even the fiend might fail to appreciate what was the obvious suggestion."

" Really, François, you're as bad as Rupert. If you're in love with a girl and can't marry her — "

She caught his eye and blushed.

" No, I didn't mean that, but — "

" I understand perfectly, and I think you were very silly. I suppose it was your uncle's idea."

" Do you also think I must be the devil? "

He laughed. " No, I can hardly think that. But, Aella, it's silly to talk about things you don't understand. It was quite unpardonable of your uncle making you say what you did."

" He didn't make me."

" People believe so easily. You don't realize the gossip in the city."

" About me? "

" About all the Kiralyi, perhaps about you

especially, because — secretly every one's in love with you."

" Isn't that rather nice of them? "

" Passion can show itself under strange forms. Aella, it's not safe to be very proud and very alone. I know."

" I don't want to be safe."

He sat spreading honey on his bread.

At last he spoke, slowly. " If Baron Zsido has got to know of this, he can do you a great deal of harm."

She laughed. " You aren't exactly comforting, François."

" Aella," he exclaimed suddenly, " I think just once I could help you without that happening which I said. But a second time — it must."

" Yes, I understand. I think it's very wonderful of you warning me."

" You see, I love you, Aella."

Daylight was streaming in through the window. She rose and put out the lamp. He found it hard to decide whether or not she really wore stockings, so closely did their silk match her arms and neck.

" It looks as if Uncle Ferdinand may have an exciting time in Parliament to-day. I'm going to hear."

" I don't know that I should."

She turned round on him.

" François, please don't be a bore. If I want to go, I'm going."

" That I never doubted."

He rose to depart.

" I wish I knew how Rupert was able to tell her what I said."

" Black magic," he suggested.

She laughed.

" Yes, I believe you're a traitor, François.

But do find out. Good-bye. Don't let anyone see you."

" People don't. Good-bye, Aella."

The Queen did not feel in the least tired. From her high window she could watch all the left bank spread in panorama below her. For a long time she sat gazing. Then she began to undress.

The courtyard was hung with shadows, as François passed. The sun had not yet risen above the Palace buildings. The place seemed deserted. Only outside the main entrance he remarked two soldiers sitting drinking at an open buffet in the street. A pleasant morning fragrance of coffee and new bread greeted him.

Down the cliff-face the narrow cobbled streets were just beginning to awaken. Here lay the poorest quarter of the town. He found a tavern by the river-side that had remained open all

night. Very late hours were kept even by the humblest in the city.

It was an unpretentious building, a wine and beer house of the kind which abounded along the river shore on this bank. Upon the counter stood a selection of glasses in varying stages of use, and two huge bottles three-quarters full, from which the publican would supply from time to time the requirements of his guests.

The clientele sat on benches at rough wooden tables. At this hour the place was almost empty, but in the corner by the door a select party made merry with noisy good-fellowship. They might have been some less opulent gang of cracksmen celebrating the end of their night's crime, or, more innocently, perhaps, a group of early labourers refreshing themselves before the day's work.

Their conversation ceased abruptly as Fran-

çois entered. Certainly his appearance was incongruous enough here. But he bore himself with a strange air of something more than authority, that choked their derision, and made them shrink away uneasily as he passed. Then his figure seemed to melt into the shadow of the table where he sat. The publican's strapping daughter thought him remarkably young and good-looking as she brought him his wine.

The company had begun to talk again. He listened. They were discussing the devil.

" My wife's brother saw him in the Palace corridor," said one.

" What was your wife's brother doing there? "

The first speaker winked. " He knows one of the maids."

François did not feel interested in the moral vagaries of the gentleman's brother-in-law.

When his attention returned another was speaking.

" They say that if she touches a holy thing, it burns her like hot iron. She has a terrible mark on her body where they sprinkled the water at her Baptism."

" Have you seen it? "

All laughed aloud. " He wishes he could."

" Her youth and beauty are the gift of the fiend," said an older man, " and every night she pays him his price. Those at the Palace know, but they won't tell. They're afraid."

" Yes, my wife's brother touched his cloak, as he brushed past, and when he came on to our house he was as white as a sheet and smelt of sulphur. He lay back there in a chair, and till he'd drunk two full glasses he might have been dumb."

" What did he say then? "

" He remembered badly. It was so dark. But he distinctly saw the cloven hooves, and the face — poor fellow, he nearly fainted again when he tried to tell us about it."

" It's an abomination that these things should happen."

" Their time will soon be done," said the older man.

" What do you mean? "

The other glanced round the room anxiously, then made a sign for all to come closer. They leant over towards him, and the conversation was continued in a whisper. François' curiosity had to remain unsatisfied. Only from time to time he caught occasional remarks uttered in a louder tone.

He noted one especially. " It seems a shame. No city has had so beautiful a queen."

There was a slight murmur of approval.

" It isn't her fault if the curse is on her family."

The older man frowned. " She is herself the curse. They say she was never born. She stepped fully grown out of the tunnel, where she has lived since the beginning. She is one of the evil spirits from the other side. But — " Then once more his words became inaudible.

They were interrupted a second time by the opening of the door, as Crawford entered.

" What's bringing all the toffs here this morning? " one muttered.

The others scowled suspiciously.

Crawford's eyes needed a few moments to grow accustomed to the semi-obscurity of the place. Then he recognized François. He walked across and sat down beside him.

" You're the last person I expected to meet here," he remarked.

" I might almost say the same."

" I was walking home and stepped in for a drink. I'm afraid I have low tastes."

" So have I. I've been listening with great interest to the conversation over there."

Crawford laughed. " What were they saying? "

" I only heard fragments, but they sounded highly treasonable." He looked at Crawford curiously. " Crawford, I'm a good deal junior to you, and I want to ask you an impertinent question."

François had a quiet manner, expressive of anything but immaturity. Their eyes met with an understanding, perhaps an antagonism, that made words almost unnecessary.

" You want to ask, am I the Queen's — friend? "

" Yes."

They were silent as the girl brought a fresh glass of wine.

" You know that I must stand outside all parties."

" I don't mean that."

" Then I think the most beautiful thing in the world is the feminine form, and I would give my soul to help anyone who possesses it in such youth and perfection as she does."

François smiled strangely.

" I would do the same a thousand times over," he said, " if I had a soul."

" You are a sceptic."

" No, but I sometimes wonder. I'd like to propose a toast, ' The Queen.' Will you drink it with me? "

Crawford hesitated. Then he raised his glass.

" Some day you will think I was a hypocrite," he said.

François did not reply.

The party in the far corner looked up as the glasses clinked, but otherwise took little interest, being engrossed in their own conversation. Over the back of their chairs leant the publican's daughter, also immersed. The publican himself sat behind his counter reading a late edition of last night's paper.

Crawford gazed long across the room. " Yet how could I have known? " he murmured at last.

They did not speak again till they went out. At the door François turned abruptly.

" Who was that you introduced to us at the Kávéház? " he asked.

" A young fellow called Passmore. I've just been seeing him back to his hotel."

" His mysterious companion sounded most romantic. I longed to meet her."

" He's a young fool. I suppose he's got mixed

up in some low intrigue, and'll soon want me to help him out."

François laughed. " Why else do we employ diplomats? Good-bye, I must take a taxi and hurry home before it becomes too impossibly light to go to sleep."

Chapter Five

"COME IN," GROWLED PASSMORE. He felt that he had just that minute gone to bed. For the sum he paid daily on his bill the hotel servants might reasonably be expected to know the conventional hour at which gentlemen require calling after balls.

"A lady wishes to see you, sir."

"Well, she can't," glancing at his pyjamas. Then, as visions of the possible loveliness he might be dismissing flitted across his mind, "What does she want?"

"She would like to speak to you, sir. She said it was urgent."

There was something not ungratifying about his fair visitor's insistence. He felt that

henceforth he would run the gauntlet of the hall-porter's eye with an increased self-confidence. The wicked are always admired, especially when their wickednesses appertain to sex.

" Very well, I'll see her up here," and he pulled on his dressing gown, imitation Japanese.

Broad views were current in the city. So trifling an unconventionality as the reception of a lady in a gentleman's bedroom was little likely to shock, even if the gentleman was in bed.

He was disappointed when Lulu entered. Her known reputation must of course have made an impression with the staff. Yet there is something perennially enticing about the unknown. She sat on his bed, and clasped her hands.

" My friend," she exclaimed, " I have another favour to ask."

Daylight was not wholesome for Lulu. Hers were inherently vespertinal charms. Passmore

could not but regret a precipitation which had destroyed for him his last vestiges of glamour. But reflection brought sympathy. Her agitation must indeed be genuine if it drove her forth into so unbecoming an environment. She had not even troubled to change her dress. A hasty cloak was thrown over her shoulders, and a scarf binding back her hair exposed mercilessly the ravages of time on her face.

"I'll help you, if I can, Lulu," he said. "But I'm afraid I'm still terribly sleepy."

"I haven't slept at all," she replied reproachfully. "I'm so tired I wonder I don't faint."

"There's brandy in the cupboard. Do you mind my tooth-mug?"

Lulu did not mind.

"That's better," she sighed. "You cannot imagine what I have been through. I shall show

you the letter they brought me from Rupert this morning."

"Wouldn't that be indiscreet?"

"You are my friend."

Even so the confidence seemed excessive. Nor had his friendship with Lulu retained its pristine gilt. He realized that whatever value it might now possess existed only within the range of external observation. Yet she had undoubtedly been wronged. It was something to have found a cause over which he could plausibly persuade himself that he was expending genuine emotion. He took the letter. It was a simple half sheet, headed with the royal arms. It bore no date, nor any name to show to whom it was addressed.

MADAM,

I must express my regret if through any fault of my own you have been led to place an

unwarranted construction upon my conduct towards you. It is unnecessary to define too explicitly the only relations that can exist between yourself and a person of my standing. In default of such an arrangement, I earnestly recommend your early withdrawal from the city, as much for your sake as my own.

I remain your obedient servant,

RUPERT KIRALYI.

"The man's a cad," exclaimed Passmore.

"Rupert never wrote that."

"Who did?"

"You know. The Queen."

Passmore could hardly resist a smile, picturing in his mind the girl he had seen last night at the ball. There was an incongruity almost comical between the document and its authoress. But his experience of the world was limited. This was

his first contact with real events. The Queen had been brought up in an atmosphere ripe with corruption. In her body ran undiluted and unchecked the blood of that family, of whose sins and worse he had heard dreadful whispers in the city. What wonder if such a soil produced such a blossom? His mind played complacently round the metaphor of a lovely flower engendered from the poison of some reeking tropic mud. Life after all was not so difficult. His duty was clear. This, he supposed, was moral indignation.

" Why have you shown it to me? " he asked.

She edged closer towards him, perhaps more from nervousness than deliberate design. Her fingers twined themselves among the tassels of the counterpane. A cheerful sunlight filled the room. Passmore suddenly realized that he was hungry, and wondered when he could decently ring for breakfast.

" Wouldn't it be a judgment on them all, if the poor girl they scorned did marry the prince? " she asked coaxingly.

" But suppose the prince has really changed his mind? "

She turned round fiercely. " You know yourself how they made him do it. This," and she crunched the paper in her hand, " is the wicked lie of a little she-devil who'd rather see poor women dragged into shame than let a drop of honest blood be introduced into the corrupt veins of her family. The heir of the Kiralyi may take his pleasure of me, then I'm to be cast off like a torn rag."

Passmore grasped her arm.

" Stop. You mustn't talk like this," he said. " There are people passing outside in the corridor."

Lulu grew calm.

" Forgive me," she replied.

He picked up the paper which she had flung on the counterpane, and uncrumpled it.

" Is the signature a forgery? " he asked.

" No, it is Rupert's own writing. They have forced him to do it."

Passmore began to think that Lulu's lover had not shown any very exceptional fortitude. But her next words caused him to hesitate.

" He is their prisoner," she said.

Visions of dungeons and torture-chambers thronged to his mind.

" Where? " he asked.

" In his room. There is a guard before the door. He may not go out. My friend," she exclaimed, " this is why I have come to you. For hours I have worked with Baron Zsido to arrange his escape. Now all is ready. When the guard is changed he can walk away. The officer is bribed.

But Rupert knows nothing of it. How can we send a message to him in the Palace? We are known, and cannot go ourselves. But you are not known. You could go."

Passmore sat up aghast.

"It is not difficult," she continued. "My sister works in the Palace. If you give the letter to her, it is enough. She will see it reaches Rupert."

"Yes, but what reason could I have for visiting your sister at so extraordinary an hour?"

"No one will be surprised. She often receives gentleman friends at — extraordinary hours."

He inclined his head.

"Where will I find this lady?" he asked.

The proposition still appeared remarkably unattractive.

"I can take you to a side door. Inside you

will find only one guard. You tell him you have come to see Nina."

"Nina," he repeated. He wondered vaguely whether all the Lulu family had lost their surnames.

"Will he show me her room?" he asked. It seemed sadly improbable that Nina's admirers received any such attention from the military.

"No, you must find the way yourself. I'll draw a little plan," and she began to sketch on the back of the hotel bill which lay on his table. Turning it over for an instant, she glanced at the total and whistled.

"Go on," he commanded hastily. "Say what I've to do."

"Nina will take the letter, and you come straight back. There is nothing difficult."

"Yes, but suppose someone else meets me in the Palace corridor who isn't accustomed to

Nina's eccentricities, and suppose I'm examined and the letter found."

"You are right. There is some risk. But I came to you, because I knew you were brave."

Half awake and unbreakfasted Passmore felt far from brave. Yet this was just such an adventure as his daydreams had often envisaged. He discovered that reality has a peculiar taste of its own.

"You will do it?" she asked.

"When do we start?"

"At once."

He flattered himself that he was showing the true spirit of reckless adventure, but suspected also a fear of that inevitable self-recrimination which must have followed any refusal. Even less palatable was the lurking suggestion that he might be submitting weakly to the influence of Lulu.

" Well, go downstairs and wait," he ordered. " I must dress."

The Palace still slept as they reached the courtyard. On the morning after the ball few were abroad. The place was strangely unguarded. To Passmore it seemed that he was entering the ruin of some age-old line of kings. The whole adventure became fantastic and unreal to him. Such things did not occur in actual life. The conviction soothed his courage.

Lulu left him at a little postern door, over which hung the Kiralyi arms in crumbling stone. A dark, narrow passage led deep into the building. He felt that he was plunging into the orifice of some cavern of iniquity. On an empty stomach the mind is peculiarly open to morbid imaginations. Nor was he ignorant of the rumours current in the city.

Yet difficulties appeared to melt before him.

He remembered very little of the events. Only half his being seemed occupied in his actions. The very intensity that kept his outward faculties on the qui vive stunned as though into a trance his inner sense. Everything moved with the smoothness of a dream. He wondered uneasily at what stage he would plunge into nightmare.

As he left Nina's room his mind contained no distinct impression of what he had seen or said. His one instinct had been to fulfil his task and escape. He had a vision of an agitated dressing-gowned figure standing in a darkened room, reading the letter.

"You can find your way out?" she had whispered, and he had nodded, confident that his mind retained every detail of Lulu's plan.

Yet now that he was outside in the maze of corridors all seemed different. A great load had been taken from his mind. The relief destroyed

the spell in which he had moved hitherto. His nerves relaxed, half off their guard, and lost that almost clairvoyant tension which had guided him. Every window was shuttered. Unwillingly he began to remember the strange reputation of this place and of those who dwelt there. He became conscious suddenly of an unreasoning terror. The very air he breathed seemed thick and perfumed with some dreadful knowledge. He hurried down the passage, turning corners at random. There was a door through which he must pass to reach the head of the stairs. He recognized it by a gilt frieze that ran round the panels. Turning the knob he burst into a strange room.

The curtains were drawn and all was quite dark. Only across the head of the bed a bar of daylight fell, slanting through an aperture. Despite himself he stood and gazed at the face and form it revealed.

The Queen slept with the utter self-abandonment of a child. One arm supported her neck, the other hung loosely over the side. Its sleeve had worked up above her elbow. The bed-clothes had been cast restlessly back, leaving only a sheet whose white folds moulded her body as though carved in marble or alabaster. But from time to time her long eyelashes would flicker, and her face and bare arm were flushed with life.

Passmore stood still, hardly daring to breathe. Little details began slowly to define themselves — her clothes in a heap on a chair, the insistent ticking of the clock, and a faintly suggested fragrance of violets that filled the room. For a moment he forgot even that he was an intruder. Then remembering, he felt gratified that he had been able to forget.

Some slight sound must have reached her,

for she stirred uneasily. He turned quickly to go, envisaging in a flash the punishment, the publicity, the disgrace, if he were discovered. A small lamp stood on the table behind him. His sudden movement brought him up against it. It swayed and fell with a crash.

The Queen sat up, awake in an instant.

" Who's that? " she asked.

Passmore had shrunk back into a dark corner.

She leapt out of bed. " Who's that? " she repeated.

She began to grope in the darkness. He could feel her warm breath against his face, then her bare foot on his shoe.

She gave a half-stifled gasp, and flung herself at him.

" Who are you? "

He thrust her aside, and sprang towards the

door, but she clung to him like a wild creature.

" What do you want? " she panted, reaching out and switching on the light.

He stood back awkwardly. He had had little experience of such encounters. Amid all his confusion he could not resist a feeling of exultation that he should be a principal actor in so sensational a scene.

" My name is George Passmore," he said at last. " I'm a foreigner. I'm sorry to have given you this fright."

" What did you come for? "

The question was difficult to answer, and he hesitated.

She blushed suddenly, putting quite a different construction upon his embarrassment, and he, guessing her thoughts, seized the suggestion with a desperate alacrity.

" Certainly I had hoped — I had heard in the city — and after what you said to your cousin last night," he blurted out, " I hardly imagined you could object to — that sort of thing."

Her muscles seemed to tighten. There was that about her which suggested a young tigress at bay, incalculably and suddenly dangerous.

" How do you know what I said to my cousin? "

He realized his indiscretion, but considered it more prudent to tell the truth.

" I heard," he replied.

" You seem to have been rather useful. Who suggested you should listen? The future Grand Duchess? "

He winced. In this room his acquaintanceship with Lulu appeared quite remarkably glamourless. A wave of indignation swept over him: indignation against Fate that had given this girl

a loveliness exceeding his most golden dreams, but had set him in the opposing camp; indignation against the girl for the feelings which his very natural conduct must have roused in her. Fate being the less accessible, he wisely concentrated his wrath upon the Queen.

"No one with any chivalry —" he began.

She appeared to have lost interest.

"Good-bye, Mr. Passmore," she said. "I'm afraid you have made a mistake. Will you please go?"

He looked at her bewildered for an instant. He wondered why she did not give the alarm and have him seized. The prospect decided him. He bowed and walked out. It was difficult to think of anything to say.

The Queen sat on her bed and buried her face in her hands. Later she wrote to François.

". . . He said people think it in the city. François, I don't care what they think. I'm their Queen."

She sealed the note and burst into tears.

Chapter Six

LULU DID NOT WAIT FOR PASSMORE to reappear. If he succeeded in his enterprise, much had still to be arranged. If he did not succeed, perhaps she was unwilling to be involved in his failure. Her presence on the Palace doorstep might well be difficult to explain. It seemed unnecessary to loiter ostentatiously in the lion's mouth.

She was feeling very tired. She had not lied when she spoke of her morning's activities. Guards had needed to be bribed, transport to be prepared for the fugitive. Strong in her own righteousness and the Baron's purse, Lulu had shown no lack of energy. As she walked down through the streets, she reflected with a not un-

pleasant self-pity upon the situation. It is highly romantic to be poor and oppressed. Only she could have desired a less incongruous oppressor.

She chose a seat upon the promenade not far from the tunnel's mouth. Here the Palace gardens reached almost to the river, falling in terraces down the cliff, an oasis of green trees and flowers amid the houses which straggled up on either side. At the bottom of the hill a spiked iron fence separated them from the road, broken only by the masoned entrance of the tunnel. A private gate heavily padlocked led through to a zigzag path. Lulu sat down and waited. From this gate her lover should arrive. A well-paid deliverer had provided the key.

As time slipped by, she grew drowsy.

The city was untidy rather than immoral. All the paraphernalia of nightly enjoyment, equally prevalent elsewhere, but better concealed,

remained here relentlessly exposed in the streets up to an advanced hour of the morning. Crawford was struck by the poverty and stubborn optimism of the right bank. Even at this hour he found it necessary to restrain several of its belated and more importunate daughters. Catching sight of Lulu he sighed, expecting another such encounter. Then he noticed that she was asleep. He had wandered continuously since leaving François, and felt that a rest might be not unacceptable. She did not wake as he sat quietly beside her.

This was Crawford's first meeting with Lulu. He was not an habitué " chez Kraut."

Traffic had hardly begun across the bridge. A few workmen passed; a trolly clattered by with a load of stone for some road repairs in the old part of the town. But it was still early for the day's business. The city slept in a morning haze, which

outlined indistinctly, as though perforce, little details of the great cliff. From innumerable chimneys threaded a blue film of smoke into the clearer blue of the sky. Deliberately he reflected upon the tyranny whose shadow marred this beauty, forcing back into his mind its shame, which he had heard from Passmore. Surely he should congratulate himself that he was sharing in the exorcism of so evil a spirit! He was employed to thwart the wickedness of the proud, and enable a royal prince to marry the humble maiden of his choice. Had ever secret agent a more congenial duty? Yet he felt dissatisfied. A knight-errant's task becomes unnecessarily complicated when the young and the attractive usurp roles reserved by social convention for unscrupulous octogenarians.

He frowned, realizing that his neighbour had woken, and was looking in his direction. He

had already classified her as negligible. In matters of taste his judgments were instantaneous and critical to a fault. Then he noticed that she was gazing, not at him, but at some point beyond him on the river-bank. Her eyes were opened in sudden terror. He turned, startled, to discover the cause of her alarm.

From the road to the water's edge sloped a short bank of turf, green and well-kept at this season of the year. Where it met the river long strands of weed stretched out into the current, which gurgled and strained among them in a continuous tussle. The water was muddy with the spring rains, and in the morning sun seemed coated with a sheen melting from grey into leaden white. At the point where Lulu's eyes were fixed a tumult of ripples was breaking against the flow, and through the tangle by the shore appeared an ivory arm and head of yellow hair.

Lulu shared all the superstitions of the city. But as shoulders and dripping body emerged shimmering from the water, no great superstition was needed to suppose their owner a patron goddess of the stream. Little waves and eddies fawned round the slim waist, and jostling against each other splashed riotously up to kiss the wet hair knotted loosely upon her head. Clearly the Aella herself had come to take part in the impending drama. Lulu wondered uneasily which side was to receive the benefit of supernatural assistance. Of course she and her royal lover needed and deserved it most. But this conviction brought little comfort. The Aella was notoriously insensitive to moral obligations.

The figure stepped lightly up on to the bank exactly opposite the entrance of the Palace grounds. Barely thirty yards away was the bench where sat Crawford and Lulu. Otherwise the

road was wholly deserted. She walked unconcernedly across, not noticing or not troubling to notice that she was observed. They could see now that she wore a close-fitting bathing dress of some material glossy and snowy-white, already half-dried to a silken lustre by the sun and wind. Reaching the gate she fitted into its lock a key which she wore tied round her arm. It seemed to Lulu that the river-spirit was subjecting herself unnecessarily to human limitations.

Crawford gave a little gasp of surprise, catching sight of the face, which had turned for a last look at the river, as the gate swung open.

" The Queen! " he exclaimed involuntarily, and sprang to his feet.

Lulu had shuddered. " Hush! " she whispered. " It is that deathless one whose image she bears."

For the moment he had forgotten his com-

panion's existence. Now he looked at her, and saw that she was trembling in an anguish of superstitious dread. Ardent belief is infectious. He laughed to reassure both himself and her.

"I hardly think the river-goddess would trouble to put on a bathing dress or provide herself with a duplicate key to the garden gate."

"She makes herself like a mortal to deceive us."

"Surely it's more reasonable to suppose that she actually is the particular mortal she appears to be?"

"No mortal would rise out the depths of the river."

"She'd merely been bathing."

"Why should the Queen bathe here?"

"I imagine that she wished to."

A fixed idea was hardening in Lulu's eyes. She grasped his arm.

" Rupert! " she whimpered. " What will she do to him? "

He gazed at her, bewildered.

She was almost dragging him towards the gate. " You must help. He's coming through the garden. He'll meet — Her! "

She had produced the key, obtained — for a consideration — from a wellwisher, and was fumbling at the lock. Crawford followed, not unwillingly. His curiosity was thoroughly roused.

The Palace rock must have been riddled with subterranean passages. A rockery at a bend of the zigzag path concealed the opening from which the Grand Duke emerged. He filled his lungs with fresh morning air, as though to oust the tainted associations of his prison. Then glancing furtively round, he began the descent towards the river.

Perhaps he too, like Lulu, shrank back in

superstitious awe when, turning a corner, he came upon the white ethereal figure sitting under a tree by the pathside. Her hands were twined in her hair, wringing out the water from its rich profusion, which catching the sunlight in glimpses through the leaves would gleam as though shot with sudden gold. She leant back delightedly, surrendering her body to the scents and thrills of the clear morning, while the soul of the dew-pearled garden seemed to dance in her eyes. Rupert stood undecided, half recognizing, half doubting. He had heard strange stories about his cousin. He almost hoped that this was merely some wood-nymph whom he had surprised. Seeing him, she sprang to her feet.

" What are you doing here? " she exclaimed quickly.

The sound of her voice reassured him, and he stepped forward.

" I think we'd better both leave that question unanswered, Aella."

She looked him full in the face. " I've been bathing in the river."

" I suppose you liked the publicity? "

" I'd rather trust any of my people I met in the street than your — friends, who come into my bedroom while I'm sleeping."

He stared at her stupidly, and she laughed, shaking back the hair from her face. It was impossible to feel angry now, when the morning air was caressing her, pregnant with adventure.

" I suppose really everything's fair when you're defying a cruel persecutor."

" Aella, I don't know what you mean."

She gave him a quick glance. " Perhaps Lulu could explain."

He frowned anxiously, wondering what

Lulu had been doing, and whether perhaps some details of the plot had been betrayed.

" What connexion has this with bathing? " he asked.

She dropped her eyes as though to guard a strange secret that had crept unobtrusively into them.

" Sometimes when things happen, I go to the river, and it helps."

He shuddered, as the old fear came flooding back. Her form seemed to have emanated from, and to be melting back into, the brightness around her. For a moment he doubted again whether she were his cousin or some elemental spirit of the earth. At least her words confirmed all that he had heard of the familiar with whom she was in dreadful communion. Then he thrust aside superstitious fancies. After winning so far was he to turn back when only a young girl in a

bathing dress remained to represent the mailed fist of tyranny?

He moved as though to pass her, but she stood out, blocking his way.

" Where are you going? " she asked. " You know you're my prisoner."

He laughed unimpressed. " Prisoners escape when their jailers aren't strong enough to hold them."

" Rupert, you may have been too clever for my servants, but you haven't escaped yet."

Her mouth was firmly closed. She had not the least idea how she could stop him.

A dangerous light came into his eyes. " I advise you not to tempt me. You know that you're quite absurdly defenceless."

She did not move.

The unexpected arrival of Lulu hardly

evoked from her lover any marked expression of joy. He frowned irritably as she emerged. Hitherto a convenient bush had concealed both her and Crawford.

" Rupert," she cried, " we're waiting. Come now. Nothing can stop you."

He waved her back, but the Queen had turned and was staring in surprise.

" Who's this? " she asked; then guessing quickly, " Oh, Lulu, of course. I hope she won't get contaminated."

Her eyes sparkled mischievously. She felt all her senses ravished with the wild gaiety and excitement of danger.

Lulu hesitated, regretting the impatience that had driven her forward. She had the intuition to perceive that in this spring garden her own figure must appear quite remarkably unnymphlike.

Perhaps Rupert felt so too. " Why have you come here? " he asked. " You were to wait for me by the gate."

" I was anxious," she replied with some dignity, " and I thought that even a poor girl's love might be useful if you needed help."

" I needed no help. I was coming down to join you."

The Queen waited.

" Let us go now," said Lulu, glancing at her. " We cannot afford to waste time. You're not safe yet from the power of our tyrants."

" Tyrants can reach so far," remarked the Queen.

Rupert eyed her grimly. " Wise tyrants remember to take a body-guard when they're likely to meet their victims."

" Rupert," exclaimed Lulu, " what shall we do to her? "

A swift glance of understanding passed between them.

" Aella," he said quietly, seizing her wrist, " you're coming back with us into the passage."

She wrenched herself free, stooping like lightning to pick up a stone which lay at her feet. But Lulu had grasped her round the waist, pinioning her arms to her side.

" Hold her head back, Rupert," she cried. " She's biting my hand."

From his hiding-place Crawford had watched and listened to the whole scene. Although uninformed of the plan to rescue the Grand Duke, he, as Baron Zsido's ally, could hardly interfere to hinder its execution. Nor had he the least intention to assist Lulu, and therefore had stubbornly disregarded her tug at his sleeve as she stepped out into the open. But now he could restrain himself no longer.

There was a note of command in his voice. " Stand still, both of you, or I fire."

For their personal safety secret agents will often conceal a small automatic pistol in some handy pocket.

All turned to face him in startled surprise, bewildered into silence by this strangely unexpected figure wearing immaculate evening dress and levelling at them a gleaming, wicked-looking barrel.

Then the Queen recovered presence of mind to shake herself free.

" You traitor! " said Lulu at last. " What do you want? "

But Rupert had recognized him. " Mr. Crawford," he exclaimed, " there is some mistake. You know who I am."

Crawford ignored them, keeping, however, a watchful eye should they dare to move. He bowed to the Queen.

" Madam, I apologize for this unceremonious appearance and for my presence as a trespasser in your garden, for which our Minister, if you wish, will also express his official regret. I can only hope that my discourtesy may be redeemed by the opportune assistance which fortune enables me to afford you."

She smiled at him. " I am very grateful. You came just at the right moment."

" What does this mean, Crawford? " asked Rupert sharply. " You know what you're paid to do."

" Quite well enough to be sure it doesn't include violence offered to Her Majesty's person."

" What business have you to interfere with the methods we use? "

" For your own sake I suggest that my business had better remain undiscussed." Then turn-

ing to the Queen, " What shall I do with His Royal Highness? "

Rupert scowled angrily. " Oh, send me to the devil, if you like," he muttered.

She glanced at him, and Lulu, watching her closely, saw a sudden mocking smile dance across her face, and shuddered aghast, hardly realizing to the full the horror she suspected.

" Rupert," said the Queen, " sometimes people get taken at their word."

" No," cried Lulu hysterically. " You can't — you couldn't — be so wicked."

Rupert stared at them both. " What do you mean? " he asked.

The Queen turned to Crawford. The mocking smile was now half hidden, collected into an ambush from which it peeped deep in her eyes.

" I want to speak to my cousin alone. Will you see us, please, to the mouth of the passage? "

Again Lulu shuddered. Then forcing her mouth into a leer: " Apparently," she observed, " Her Majesty likes being alone with men underground — in the dark."

" Which passage is this? " asked Crawford.

The Queen looked at him almost defiantly. " The secret underground entrance to my Palace. I'll show you the way."

He hesitated, but there was something in her attitude which forbade argument. She stood, waiting to be, accustomed to be, obeyed, and mechanically he submitted.

Already she was walking up the path.

Covering Rupert with his weapon, he pointed after her. " You will follow Her Majesty," he ordered grimly.

Perhaps the Palace rock had some peculiarly porous quality, or perhaps it was so honeycombed with subterranean chambers, whether natural or

artificial, that sounds from its inmost recesses permeated readily to the upper air. But as Lulu and Crawford lingered outside the closed door of the passage they could hear far beneath them a swelling murmur where echoes rolled uneasily through vast caverns. To Crawford it seemed that both he and the Queen must have absorbed some madness: she to issue, he to carry out, a command whose consequences he hardly dared envisage. He glanced at his companion, and saw her face drawn with horror.

The echoes were growing articulate, as though voices spoke in the bowels of the earth. Strange gusts and currents disturbed the sound, which yet persisted, a faint interminable hum as of words overheard in a sick-chamber from some room beneath. Then distinct and loud with anguish came Rupert's cry:

"No, no, Aella, not that!"

Lulu sank to the ground. "Rupert, Rupert," she groaned, and her eyes blazed at Crawford. "You fool! You don't know what you've done."

This was the first time that François had helped.

Chapter Seven

BARON ZSIDO WAS IN NO ANGELIC temper that morning. He paced restlessly round the room, glaring at the daffodils in the vases, the china on the white chimneypiece, and his wife's light-coloured chiffon dress. He had had little sleep.

"That fellow Crawford was right. Women have no concern in serious affairs."

She sighed resignedly. "Béla, if you really think that, why do you tell me about them?"

"We can toy with such fripperies in spare moments, but during work hours, remember, you aren't wanted."

The Baroness did not trouble to appear of-

fended. " Yet you use this woman of the streets — on business."

" That is different."

" Yes, your wife's an ornament who can sit still and decorate your house, while you put this creature on the throne."

He turned on her angrily. " Who said I was doing anything of the kind? "

" It seems pretty obvious. Rupert's to escape and lead the foreign troops, drive out the Queen, then marry his charming Lulu, and reign happily ever after. Personally, Béla, I'd rather have the present regime. The Queen at least is one of us."

" So you imagine you still belong to the Kiralyi? They wouldn't think twice about you if it wasn't for my money. If you betray me, Marie — "

" You needn't look so fierce. What can I betray? Ferdinand knows about your plot as well as

I do. But he daren't move. He's got no money and practically no soldiers. The poor Kiralyi are like a rotten apple. The first finger that touches them will go right through."

She took a cigarette out of the box at her side and lit it. It was slightly scented.

" You seem very distressed about the fate of the Kiralyi," he grunted.

" Don't be absurd, Béla. I've had to stand more from them than you have. I know they treat us on sufferance. Do you think I enjoy being patronized by a slip of a girl like the Queen? "

" Yes, they patronize. They patronize me, Baron Zsido, who could buy them and their paltry palace and their toyboxful of troops six times over."

" You raised me above them when you married me, Béla," and she smiled up at him provoca-

tively. The Baroness had a quite unexpectedly attractive smile.

He glanced towards her, mollified.

" Marie," he said, " this woman is not going to marry Rupert."

" Who is? "

" The Queen."

He smiled grimly at her surprise.

" Do you imagine I'd be slaving and running these risks merely to foster a little idyll of true love? When I make Rupert king, I want the girl Aella as his — "

" Principal drawing-room ornament," she suggested wryly. " Will she agree? "

He picked up a paper from the table. It was an early copy of the organ owned by himself.

" This may help to persuade her."

She read:

" Considerable interest centres round to-day's proceedings in Parliament, when Baron Zsido will ask the Government to give full particulars of a romantic attachment, formed, we understand, between the Grand Duke Rupert and a woman of the people, and to explain certain abominable suggestions whereby an exalted person (who shall be nameless) has attempted to deter him from fulfilling his promise of marriage."

* * *

" I shall see old Ferdinand before Parliament sits. The matter could still be hushed up."

" If not? "

" If not, the people are at last convinced of the girl's depravity, the foreign troops enter, and the city is ours."

" Ferdinand can be very specious. He's had to deal with situations like this before."

" He'll need to be extremely specious to explain things away this time. And even if he does, we've only to wait. The Queen lives upon indiscretions."

" I don't believe she'll ever agree to do what you want — you know what's said about her in the city? "

He waved his hand irritably.

" Marie, I refuse to discuss childishness now. If it can't be Queen Aella, it must be Queen Lulu."

" I've already warned you what I think of that."

The door opened and Passmore was announced.

He appeared embarrassed to find the Baroness in the room. But she smiled graciously at him.

" Now, Mr. Passmore," she said, " I hope

you haven't brought any more mysterious charmers to see my husband."

He fidgeted uncomfortably.

" I'm sorry. I seem to be always — "

The Baron interrupted him. " Why have you come to me? " he asked. " I thought — your friend was giving you all instructions. Has anything gone wrong? "

Passmore hesitated, glancing at the Baroness.

" Oh, if you like, I'll go outside," she exclaimed. " I'm unfortunate, Mr. Passmore. I'm seldom privileged to hear your conversation."

" You can speak in front of my wife," said the Baron coldly.

Passmore was in the depths of misery and humiliation. In the pitiless light of reason, as he walked back from the Palace, his conduct had appeared not only clumsy but despicable. Certainly

the Queen had herself furnished him with the suggestion by which he had profited. But was that any excuse? His blood ran cold, as he remembered all that he had said and let her think. Nor was his present situation any too comforting. She had seen him with unmistakable clearness in the electric light. At any minute he might be recognized, arrested, and put to public ignominy. He liked to think that Lulu was to blame. She was not of his class. She would not understand his sensitiveness to its code. The sight of the Queen, of her room and surroundings, seemed to have shaken him out of a dream. There had been a familiarity about them suggesting a life to which he was accustomed. The glamour of his adventures was drifting relentlessly away. It cut him like a knife that these people should couple his name with Lulu's.

He had come to this house in desperation. It

had seemed his only available refuge. But now, despite himself, he regretted the step. Baron Zsido had a dominant personality in presence of which he could never feel at ease.

" I delivered the letter," he said at last.

" Well, what's the matter then? "

" I lost my way in the Palace as I was going out, and got somehow to the Queen's bedroom."

The Baroness clapped her hands, laughing. " The Fairy Prince and the Sleeping Beauty! " she exclaimed.

" Did she wake? " asked the Baron quickly.

He did not appear amused.

" Yes," and he described all that had taken place.

The Baron interrogated him closely, on certain points.

" You told her you'd come as her lover? " he asked.

Passmore nodded, flushing hotly.

The other gave a short, gruff laugh. " That no doubt explains why she was unwilling to raise the alarm."

He began to pace the floor irritably. " It is most unfortunate," he exclaimed. " Didn't the woman describe the way to you? "

" She drew me a little plan of the passages, and I thought I remembered it."

" Béla, you mustn't be unreasonable," said the Baroness. " I think Mr. Passmore has been very brave," and she smiled kindly at him.

" Yes, to walk like an ass into a girl's bedroom. Tremendous courage, of course! " The Baron was worried. He liked to gamble only upon certitudes. " If they saddle this on me," he exclaimed at last, " they can break the whole effect of my speech to-day in Parliament."

" There's nothing to connect it with you,"

replied his wife soothingly. " Besides, the Queen daren't let it be known. There are too many rumours already."

" Well, anyhow, this young man's not to go about in the city."

" No. Mr. Passmore will stay to lunch with me. Then in the afternoon we'll order the carriage and both drive out to the army together."

" Yes, you can do less harm there," he agreed.

He glanced at his watch, and moved towards the door.

" Don't have any visitors before you go," he commanded.

" No, no one except François. He's coming to lunch. I invited him."

" François des Tenèbres? What do you mean by asking him to my house? "

" Surely I may ask whom I like? "

"I don't want that fellow here. He's the Queen's spy."

"Really, Béla, you're too absurd. He amuses me."

"Yes, it's always your amusements, and your beautifications, and your fal-de-lals with you women. Why can't you keep yourselves and your fripperies in their proper place?"

"Anyhow he's coming. I can't help it."

The Baron growled to himself, and walked out.

"Béla always has to be in Parliament so early now," sighed his wife.

* * *

François did not appear surprised that he should find Passmore at lunch with the Baroness.

"Yes, we met last night," he replied in answer to her question.

In the dining-room places were laid for

three. It was a glorious day outside, and through the open window countless little spots of sunlight danced and glittered amid the glass and silver, reflecting themselves on the flawless polish of the table.

Passmore was recovering his equanimity. The Baroness had been exceptionally gracious to him all the morning. He seemed really to have emerged with success from his difficulties. This afternoon he would be among fellow-countrymen, out of reach of punishment or disgrace. There was no reason or likelihood that he would ever meet the Queen again. He would soon forget what she must think of him. He felt particularly grateful towards his hostess. After the hectic thrills of the last two nights she embodied for him his return to that society in which he had been born. The Baroness was still a very beautiful woman.

He was not pleased that François had arrived. He remembered that they had met at the Kávéház, though for so short a time and under such circumstances that he had carried away little impression of either sort. But now he became conscious of an indefinable hostility existing between them. At first he attributed it to a natural and half-unconscious rivalry. Then, recalling Baron Zsido's closing remarks, he grew uneasy. If François was indeed the Queen's spy, this hostility might have a real basis. The thought was unwelcome. The Queen was a memory whom he wished to put right out of his mind.

" What's this exciting rumour I read in the Baron's paper? " François was asking. " Is Rupert going to provide us with a first-class scandal? "

His hostess looked up innocently. " I don't know. There seems to be some dreadful woman

he's unearthed. I suppose he'll have to keep her for a month or two before he tires. It's unpleasant, but if one lives in the world, one soon realizes these things happen."

He laughed. " You're very cynical. Then the report that he wants to marry is untrue? "

She waved her hand deprecatingly. " I can't say that. I really don't know. Béla never tells me any news. But it sounds unlikely. One mustn't believe everything that gets even into our paper."

" Journalists certainly have the wildest imaginations. Look at that story about the fellow who forced his way into the Queen's bedroom this morning. You saw it, didn't you? " he asked, turning almost offensively upon Passmore.

" No." He had suddenly grown very white.

" This morning! " exclaimed the Baroness. " But, François, how could the papers have heard already? "

" There was a little column in the stop press news. I was reading a late edition as I came."

" What did it say? " asked Passmore falteringly.

" That the police are searching for the fellow. I hope they catch him."

" Perhaps he had good reasons."

" What, for violating a young girl? "

" I don't mean that. But reasons of State."

" I don't understand."

Passmore paused, realizing his indiscretion.

" It sounds the most fantastic invention," remarked the Baroness quickly. " What could be his motive? "

" I can only imagine the worst. But it's the sort of rumour our journalists love."

There was a silence. François was gazing out of the window. A fire, disquietingly unrighteous, burnt in his eyes, as though he were hiding some

dreadful knowledge which yet afforded him intense amusement.

" I wonder if Rupert will ever marry," murmured the Baroness at last.

He turned to her with a smile. " I don't think so — not in this world."

She laughed. " Well, there's no marrying or giving in marriage in the next."

" On that point, Baroness, I withhold my opinion."

After lunch he took his leave. The sound of distant shouting greeted him as he stepped into the street.

The Baroness sent out a footman to buy a bundle of newspapers. None seemed to be the edition in which François had read his report.

Chapter Eight

THE PRIME MINISTER LOOKED AT the Queen with a puzzled frown.

"Why didn't you call for help?" he asked.

"Queens don't."

"But if we'd caught the fellow, we could have discredited this other story of his. Do you realize what trouble we're going to have?"

"I know the man's name. I don't want you to look for him."

"Why not?"

"He can't be punished — by me." She blushed to the roots of her hair, but with an angry disregard turned and looked her uncle in the face. "Don't you understand?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

" At least I must use the facts when Zsido makes his attack in Parliament. We need every weapon. The people are going to learn that I advised my son, and that you, a young girl, advised your cousin to seduce a wretched woman of humble birth."

Her deep grey-blue eyes filled with amusement. " We do seem rather abandoned villains, don't we? "

Looking at her he felt that her complicity might well redeem the vilest intrigue.

" Yes, unfortunately you gain as little credit by the episode as I do," he replied. " We can't afford that you should lose your hold upon the people."

" Do the people like me? "

" Surprisingly, they still do. Otherwise the city would now be full of foreign soldiers, and — my son would be king."

" What do you mean? "

" Baron Zsido has an army concentrated in the country only a few miles off. They will march on us directly he can organize a simultaneous rising here."

" Well, let's arrest him."

He laughed bitterly. " Yes, and precipitate the *coup d'état*. Madam, your only troops are the Palace guard, and you have no funds to raise more. You chose to control your exchequer yourself. We must wait and watch. As long as the people are with you, we are safe. Zsido has no wish to rely on foreign help alone."

She walked to the window of the little room, and looked out. The sunlight pouring in lost and found itself again more golden amid the hazy intricacies of her hair.

" Unfortunately," continued her uncle, " his agents in the city have already begun to un-

dermine its loyalty. Old superstitions and legends gave them a useful handle. Our family history contains a peculiarly rich and regrettable collection."

"What do they say about us?" she asked quickly.

"Hitherto fairy stories. To-day they may hear a little truth."

She smiled quietly. "The whole truth would surprise them."

"As little as possible must be disclosed if you wish to keep your throne."

A sudden question brimmed unspoken in her eyes as she glanced at him. "Yes, I think you're right."

He hesitated; then: "Madam, there is a possible solution to our difficulties. Baron Zsido himself has been to see me."

She raised her eyebrows.

" He imposes only one condition — a match between yourself and your cousin has much to commend it."

" Aren't you filling the harem rather fast? "

He frowned. " Rupert will, of course, abandon the other woman."

" How nice of him! "

" I advise you for your own good. You don't suppose that I'd let my ambitions as a father interfere with duty? "

She looked at him mockingly. " No, of course not. But I'm afraid — I can't marry Rupert. It's impossible."

" I fail to understand why my son should be so impossibly ineligible as a match."

" He's not ineligible. But people can't marry me when they're not here to do so."

" You have yourself had him locked up? "

" He escaped."

" Escaped! When did this happen? You should have told me at once." Then, hurrying on excitedly, " He'll have joined the foreign troops."

She shook her head. " No, he hasn't."

" Well, where is he? "

" Nowhere where he can marry me."

" Do you know where he is? "

Her mouth closed defiantly.

" Aella, I demand to hear what has happened to my son."

" I'm sure, when Rupert's king, he won't let his Prime Minister speak to him like that." She looked up with a sudden smile. " It would be that horrid fat Baron Zsido. Uncle Ferdinand, I'd hate to see him in your place."

The severity of his face relaxed. He knew that he had little to gain from any change of regime.

" I only ask this. Has any actual physical

violence been done?" She shook her head, and he bowed. "You are right. It will be time enough to discuss Rupert's prospects when I have cleared up this stupid affair in Parliament."

"Uncle Ferdinand, I warn you —"

He waved her words aside. "I have faced far more difficult situations with success. The day will be ours — unless some further disclosure occurs."

She pouted mischievously. "There's so much that would be inconvenient, if it came to light. I'm going to Parliament to listen."

"That would be madness."

"Why?"

"You'd be a target for every attack of the Opposition."

She turned to him imperiously. "I want to hear what they say. So I'm going."

He spread out his hands in a gesture of help-

lessness. "The Psalmist might have revised his opinion of princes if he had ever had to deal with a princess." He took his leave.

Parliament was very full. The sweeping semicircle of tiers presented a compact area of humanity. Belated members crowded even the gallery. Only the front benches were still unoccupied. Ministers and leaders of the Opposition could afford to wait until the last minute. The President had arrived, but above his head facing the multitude the royal throne stood empty. Nowadays the sovereign seldom attended debates.

Baron Zsido received a little ovation from his supporters when he appeared. The Governmental party paid a like tribute to the Prime Minister, not, however, without audible disapproval from the other side. To-day the Opposition were out for blood. Then the two armies sat

facing each other as in a lull before a storm. The room buzzed with a whispered murmur.

The President reached out to ring his bell, but checked himself, as the ushers at the door entered, crying, " Her Majesty! Her Majesty, the Queen! " Surprised, all rose to their feet.

Aella had never appeared more conscious of her royalty than now when she realized how precarious its duration might be. The spring days were still cold, and she wore a long coat of dark blue woolly cloth that clung to her, fastened round the waist with a belt. At its open neck peered the lace frill of a cotton dress, and her silk stockings showed strangely against the grave oak of official benches. A truant maze of fine gold escaped beneath the upturned brim of her hat. Aella was always reluctant to wear robes of State. As she passed round the central table towards the throne, she gazed fascinatedly at the sea of faces

piled above her. They seemed like some great cobbled façade, or, as her imagination grew hectic, the tilted surface of a monstrous tapioca pudding. Catching her uncle's eye, she smiled maliciously. Baron Zsido was bowing with a loyalty quite conspicuously fervent.

The first motion on the paper proposed a vote of censure against the Government for their treatment of the presumptive heir to the throne. The debate was opened by a back-bencher. The Baron was reserving his thunder.

When the Prime Minister rose to answer, he found, as indeed he had warned the Queen, that the house in its present humour was little inclined to swallow even the most carefully manufactured explanation. Interruptions were constant. Often only after prolonged ringings of the President's bell was he able to continue. During these intervals he would stand with a sardonic pa-

tience, curling the tips of his military moustache. The studied arrogance of his features seemingly scorned to recognize even that the clamour was articulate. But in his eyes watched a foxlike cunning absorbing every word. Her Majesty's Government were not popular on the left bank.

" . . . as a father and as a servant of the Queen," he was saying. " Duty does not always lead us along those paths which we should choose for ourselves. Natural inclination might dispose me to leniency. But in the high interests of the State and of our glorious city I felt bound to advise Her Majesty never to countenance such a marriage."

" Not marriage, merely fornication," yelled a voice.

The President rang his bell, but pandemonium had broken loose. " Pimp! Monster! Resign! Resign! "

At last silence was restored.

" That minister," proceeded the cold quiet voice, " occupies a peculiarly invidious position who finds himself allied by ties of blood to the royal house which he serves. His most intimate personal affairs are but too often the material on which he must exercise himself in his official capacity, and he has to drag through all the mud and publicity of the political arena those sacred feelings which more favoured men can treasure away only to be unfolded in the secrecy of the family bosom."

The Baron rose, trembling with fury and shaking his fist. Beneath his eyes little pouches of flesh contracted and expanded as he panted for breath.

" Then go," he cried, " go! Purge the unclean poison of the Kiralyi from the city's veins. Why should we be infected longer by the secret

gangrene and corruption of your family life? "

A howl of approval rose behind him.

" Sit down," ordered the President, but his voice was drowned.

" Go," cried the Baron, " go, you and all your Kiralyi, before we have to drive you out."

The Queen rose and held up her hand for silence. In sheer surprise the uproar ceased. It was not the custom for the sovereign to address the house. All eyes turned towards the throne, with which the bright colours of her dress where she had unbuttoned her coat contrasted incongruously. Her clear voice rang through the building.

" Gentlemen, I believe there is one occasion when the laws of our city allow me to interrupt your debates, and that is when it becomes necessary for me to support your President, who represents my authority in this house. It is a public

disgrace, and a danger to all my subjects, if you cannot behave here with dignity and order. Gentlemen, I have the right and I command you to obey the President whom I have appointed."

She sat down amid a general hush, realizing with tremendous interior satisfaction that for the moment she had made them feel like whipped schoolboys.

The Prime Minister was clearly relieved. He had shown no great confidence in his niece's eloquence or discretion when he saw her rise to speak. But in the calm that followed he was able to resume.

" I admit," he said, " that my son wished to form a matrimonial alliance, which for reasons of State appeared to myself undesirable. It is also true that in the face of Her Majesty's earnest representations he adopted an attitude so unreasonable that temporarily it was thought fit to keep

his person under close surveillance. But other and far more serious assertions have been made, reflecting not only upon me but on Her Majesty herself. What is the evidence on which these charges are based? Gentlemen, I shall tell you. They emanate from an ignorant and feckless young man, a foreigner who, not understanding a word of our language, professes to have overheard a certain highly compromising conversation last night. If my friends opposite demand it, I can mention his name. How far his statements are trustworthy I leave to your good sense to decide, merely informing you that this same young man, impelled by a criminal and cowardly lust, attempted this very morning to assault Her Majesty's person under circumstances when he had every reason to suppose that he would find her defenceless."

He had now secured the full attention of his

audience. The Queen did not meet the eyes directed upon her.

" He learnt," he continued, " that even in the veins of a young girl can flow the blood of the Kiralyi."

There were cheers from both sides of the house. The Prime Minister congratulated himself that the brunt of the danger was over. He proceeded to give a more detailed description of the incident. It was easy to play on the mercurial temperament of his hearers. He sat down at last amid a vociferous demonstration of loyalty.

Baron Zsido caught the President's eye ostentatiously, and rose to his feet.

" I must begin by apologizing, Mr. President, if carried away by an emotion not entirely, I flatter myself, unpraiseworthy I should have momentarily forgotten the respect due to your chair. But I am the less repentant for my mis-

chance that it has given us the opportunity — an opportunity we seldom enjoy — of hearing in this house a voice loved and reverenced by all," and he bowed towards the Queen. " Mr. President, there is no more loyal subject of the throne than myself. But our affection for its beautiful occupant should not obscure our judgment of actions done in her name, of actions even — I speak advisedly — done by herself. You have all listened to the first minister of her Crown. Without answering, without even denying, our allegations, he has contented himself with an attack upon a certain individual, whom he has chosen to leave nameless, and from whom, I admit, my information was in the first place derived. I shall not ask what is his own evidence for the sensational facts he has produced. I shall not allude to those darker stories current in the city, which might suggest that such episodes were neither in-

frequent nor unsolicited in the circles surrounding the — "

There was a murmur of disapproval.

" Gentlemen, I scorn such idle scandal as heartily as you do yourselves. Nor would I have ventured to establish my present assertions on the flimsy evidence that the Prime Minister supposes. Luckily I possess another and a more substantial witness."

He signalled to the ushers to open the doors.

" Mr. President, with your permission I shall bring before this house to confirm my statements His Royal Highness the Grand Duke Rupert."

There was a silence. The Prime Minister half rose from his seat, then sank back. Baron Zsido gazed anxiously at the doors, through which no one appeared.

" His Highness," he continued, " has happily escaped from the durance to which the

guilty conscience of our rulers had condemned him, and has come to confront them before you all with the true story of their shame. I shall ask him to repeat here the suggestions made to him last night by our gracious Queen."

Again there was a pause. He frowned in evident agitation, and stooping whispered something to his neighbour. A derisive titter ran round the Government benches. Someone began to cough.

As Lulu tried to slip through the open doorway, an usher held her back. She shook off his hand fiercely.

" Let me go," she ordered. " I have business in Parliament," and pushed past.

Her words broke upon the tense stillness, and every eye turned to follow her with a curious fascination as she came forward towards the central table. For a moment she waited there awk-

wardly, as though uncertain how to stand. Then, laying her gloved hands on its polished surface, she leant forward and gazed defiantly at the assembly.

" Baron Zsido," she cried in her shrill voice, " there is one here who can explain why His Royal Highness has failed you. Ask her."

The Prime Minister leapt to his feet. " Really I must protest, Mr. President," he exclaimed. " What right has this person to address the house? "

But Baron Zsido had also risen. " I believe, Mr. President, that I have the right to call a witness in support of my present motion."

A murmur of assent broke from his supporters.

The President hesitated nervously. " Her Majesty will, I think, agree that this evidence constitutes no breach of our procedure. The pro-

moters of a motion are entitled to lay before the house any facts likely to throw light upon its subject-matter," and he glanced at the Queen, who smiled wickedly.

" Yes," she replied, " we desire to be fully informed about this mysterious affair."

Lulu glared at her, opened her mouth to speak, then appeared to change her mind.

Outside in the hall sounded an uproar, as though a crowd were collecting.

" Where is His Royal Highness? " asked Baron Zsido.

Lulu had turned very white. She was trembling. Then suddenly she pointed at the Queen. " The witch! The witch! " she shrieked. " Ask her. She met him in the garden, while he was escaping. She took him to the secret underground place, where are the evil spirits whom she serves. She — they — oh, he is lost — lost. She has given

them his body — and his soul! " and she sank burying her face in her arms upon the table.

The Prime Minister's voice cut cold and scornful across her sobs.

" Might I suggest, Mr. President, that we have wasted enough time listening to these hysterical ravings. The poor creature is clearly off her head."

Lulu raised herself indignantly, and mastering her emotion spoke in firm clear tones. " No, your Highness, I am as sane as you are, in spite of all that I have seen and heard this morning. I have knocked at every door. I have stood in every street. The whole city knows now of the horror that has taken place — and they believe me. Ask them. Ask the wicked little witch-girl herself if it isn't true."

Half unconsciously the whole assembly had turned towards the Queen. She stood up, and her

face was flushed with excitement. A wave of panic began to swell in the crowded room. Few present possessed enlightenment sufficient entirely to preclude superstition.

" Yes, ask her," echoed a voice from behind Baron Zsido, " and let's know once for all."

The President rang his bell vociferously. " Silence! " he thundered. " I refuse to let these matters be discussed. If any — accident has occurred to the heir-presumptive, a proper Parliamentary inquiry will be set on foot."

A back-bencher rose. " I submit that it is neither fair to Her Majesty nor to us that such a charge should be levied and left unanswered."

The Prime Minister smiled contemptuously. " Such a charge, Mr. President, hardly requires an answer."

But no contempt was going to allay the uneasiness of the house.

" Answer! Answer! " cried voices from all sides. " Where is His Royal Highness? We want no witchcraft here."

The Queen faced them defiantly. " Gentlemen, I have no intention of answering. You may believe what you like."

A howl of fury from the doorway greeted her words. The entire populace of the city seemed to be flooding the outer hall, sweeping ushers and police before them. Now they began to pour into the Parliament chamber itself.

" She has sold herself to the Devil," cried Lulu. " She dare not deny it. Every day a victim must be sacrificed. Rupert is only the first."

It was impossible to continue the business of the day. Members were jostled from their seats, and merged in the sea of pale faces that swayed aimlessly to and fro in a frenzy of superstitious dread. The Prime Minister was collecting his pa-

pers. The President flicked wildly the pages of his Parliamentary Regulations, then stood up and declared the sitting adjourned.

As the Queen stepped down on to the floor, all shrank away in sudden panic; and she passed through their midst.

"Seize the witch," hissed some, but none dared to obey.

She was determined not to hurry. The exaggerated dread with which they regarded her demanded at least that she should depart with dignity. She smiled uncontrollably, when she reflected how much terror that dignity really concealed.

Out on the river-front her carriage was waiting. There was an ominous silence as she drove off.

At the corner by the chain bridge she passed François.

" May I come with you a little way? " he asked.

She made room for him beside her.

" Humour should be avoided when practising diabolic arts," he observed.

" I only took him at his word."

" Exactly."

" Anyhow, I wasn't just being funny. I thought I'd nip the scandal in the bud."

He laughed. " And forced it instead into most effective blossom. Scandals rather thrive, when — things happen to the scandal-monger."

Her lips pouted whimsically. " I'm afraid I make awfully silly mistakes. But what else was there to do? "

" Anything less sensational than what you've done. I was a fool to obey."

" No, you weren't. Something like that simply had to happen, to —— You got my letter? "

He nodded. " I've just met him at lunch with the Baroness."

She looked up.

" Since when," he continued grimly, " the fellow believes the police are on his track."

" I only want to forget him, and what he said. It's stupid even to mind what people think." She hesitated, then turned to him. " François, they want me to marry Rupert. They'd make him king."

" Will you? " he asked quietly.

" Surely marriages are made in heaven, not in — "

" He shall return at once, if you wish it."

" No, that would be such an anticlimax. Besides — I don't wish it. François, to-morrow I may be dethroned. You said once that every one was in love with me. I suppose I've made their

love turn into hatred. But I was their Queen. Why should I be afraid to do wrong? "

He looked away. " Aella," he said at last, " I understand what it means to be hated because once one was strong. There's nothing more horrible in the world than the revenge of the oppressed upon their oppressor. They gloat."

They sat silent, leaning back against the cushions of the carriage. The soberer, softer texture of afternoon spread slowly across the sky.

" They can't stop me being a queen — until they kill me."

" No," he replied, " the strong are always strong, even when the weak turn upon them, and tear them to pieces. Only they couldn't fight against God. Aella, it is noble and glorious to be strong, whatever the event."

" I want to be strong. I'm not a bit sorry for anything I've done." She looked at him half hesitatingly. " If anything rather dreadful happens to-night, I don't think I'd mind — I mean, perhaps I'd purposely — François, I'd ask you to help a second time."

Her eyes met his and yet shrank, as though deep down flowed an undercurrent of infinite sensitiveness receding and receding.

He made a half movement, but she turned away.

" I think you'd better go now."

When he was standing on the pavement, she said: " I'm not asking to be saved."

" No, I understand."

At street corners and outside taverns gathered excited groups. Newspaper boys were doing a roaring trade. François bought a copy, and glanced at the head-lines.

SEX? OR SORCERY

DISAPPEARANCE OF HEIR-PRESUMPTIVE

APPALLING SUSPICIONS CENTRE UPON THE QUEEN

A leading article was devoted to the subject. Its writer had tried, not altogether with success, to accommodate every opinion. The supernatural, which he refused to dismiss entirely from the story, he treated with a laboured reasonableness intended to pacify the more sceptical intelligentsia among his readers. He concluded — in italics — with the quotation: "There are more things in Heav'n and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

François restrained a smile as he stuffed the paper into his pocket. He crossed back over the

chain bridge, and looked up at the Palace. It stood clearly outlined against the sky. Behind it stretched a line of cloud, slate and rose-purple. The wind ruffled but could not efface its image from the river at his feet.

He sighed. He thought that this was the most beautiful city he had ever seen. François' experience of cities was unusually large and varied.

Chapter Nine

THERE WAS A SUPPRESSED EXCITEment about the party in the Baroness's drawing-room. They appeared to have met less for a regular meal than a sly cup of tea. The fading daylight lent even to the objects around them an air of unreality. Outside sounded from time to time the sharp incision of military commands. The city was full of foreign troops.

Crawford looked at his watch. "He's late," he said.

"He'll come," replied the Baron grimly. "Old Ferdinand knows when the game's up."

"He can't be any too pleased by his son's — disappearance."

The Baroness filled the teapot from the silver kettle at her side.

" We seem to be living in a fairy story," she remarked with a little shudder.

Her husband frowned. " A fairy story with an eminently material explanation. The Kiralyi know how to dispose of prisoners well enough without the aid of black magic."

Crawford looked up. " What do the people say? "

" A crowd of several thousands is now outside the Palace howling for the blood of the witch. Of course they consider our rumours have been triumphantly confirmed."

Passmore sat apart as a silent spectator, contented only to find himself in the midst of such events. The whole afternoon had passed like a dream, the drive out to the army, the sudden order to advance, then their martial entry into the

city. He had come to consider himself more or less as an appendage to the Baroness. Such also may have been the light in which the others regarded him.

The Prime Minister kissed the Baroness's hand with a stately gallantry.

"When Beauty takes arms against us," he remarked, "it is time to submit."

"We sympathize with Your Highness's private troubles," she replied.

He hesitated, embarrassed. Then, turning to the Baron, "I have again laid your proposals before Her Majesty."

All looked at him inquiringly.

"I regret that she remains firm in her refusal."

The Baron frowned. "You explained to her what the consequences must be? I cannot answer for the actions of the city."

" That argument makes no appeal to her."

" Your Highness," exclaimed the other, " I ask you as man to man. Surely you would prefer to see this extraordinary mystery dissipated and your son established upon the throne, even if — to be frank — his reign fell largely under my guidance? You as his father would naturally receive a full share of honour, and Her present Majesty need sacrifice little dignity in becoming the consort of the King."

The Prime Minister spread out his hands. " Baron Zsido, you have us all at your mercy. You can dictate what terms you please. Personally, I consider those you suggest extremely generous."

" But the Queen will not be persuaded? "

" She will not."

" Really, doesn't it seem unreasonable that, to satisfy the caprice of this girl, the city must be

plunged into civil war, and your son abandoned to a fate, if we are to believe popular rumour, quite peculiarly atrocious? "

" I cannot deny that Her Majesty's recent conduct has done much to weaken my allegiance."

" And the Kiralyi? "

" The Kiralyi would agree that their duty to the dynasty necessitated the removal of one who seemed bent upon its ruin."

" Your Highness, I make you an offer. If you and your supporters will march out of the city at once, you pass under my safe conduct. The girl will see reason when she finds herself in the Palace alone."

Their eyes met and understood one another.

" It is my duty to accept," he replied.

The Baroness had been listening with close attention. She laughed strangely.

" When the crowd see the Kiralyi marching out, the Queen will not be alone in the Palace long. Witchcraft's hardly popular here."

" Her Majesty will be under the protection of my troops," interposed Crawford coldly.

" Yes," said the Baron. " She must not be touched — yet. She has first to undo the mischief she has done."

" You waste your time," exclaimed the Queen's uncle. " Aella has learnt how to be obstinate."

" I have arguments that may prove convincing."

" You will go to the Palace? "

Baron Zsido looked at him grimly. " You can hardly expect me to enter an atmosphere where persons disappear with such remarkable suddenness. I shall ask the Queen to meet me on common ground to discuss my proposals."

The other concealed an ironic smile. " But who will be brave enough to venture with your message into the presence of the sorceress? "

" I shall take it," said Crawford.

The Baron turned to him surprised. " I thank you, Mr. Crawford. A foreigner is perhaps the best envoy I could send."

It was quite dark when Crawford at last set out to climb the steep hill to the Palace. As he approached the top, he found the street filled with people hurrying in the same direction as himself. The crowd grew denser the farther he proceeded. He could hardly force his way among them. All seemed to be aiming towards the Palace gates. Some fingered weapons, others amulets and charms. He thought he remarked a number of priests in their midst. But the square was ill-lighted, and the words of exhortation that he fancied he could distinguish were soon drowned

in the general clamour. He knew that they had come for the blood of the Queen.

The foreign soldiers in the gate-house saluted, and let him pass. A howl of baffled rage arose from those in the crowd who saw the episode. He smiled grimly, reflecting that if they had known his destination he would never have come through their midst alive.

He found the Queen on the great throne in the audience chamber. She sat listlessly, with her legs stretched out on to the floor, letting her skirt crinkle up above her knees. Her eyes gazed across the room infinitely tired. She did not seem to notice Crawford.

He walked up and stood in front of her.

" Madam, you must forgive me if I intrude upon you again."

She turned quickly, then recognizing him,

" Mr. Crawford," she exclaimed, and held out her hand.

He stooped to kiss it.

" I'm sorry to receive you so informally, but as you see — I'm alone."

" Has no one stayed? "

She shook her head.

He wished that he could have explained how unwilling had been his own share in her misfortunes. But it was impossible to justify himself when she had not attempted to reproach. At least he had been able to render her a service that morning. And his present errand appeared innocent enough. It was clearly better that she should discuss terms with the other side, than remain here in this terrible isolation. Though surrounded by enemies, she would be under his protection. Looking at her, he felt himself a tower of strength.

" Madam, if I come as Baron Zsido's ambassador, it is because I imagined you would prefer to receive one who was exterior to the politics of your city."

She made a gesture of assent.

" He asks whether you will pay him the high honour of dining as his guest at the Hôtel Urbana to-night, when he would submit certain proposals to you."

" Why the Hôtel Urbana? "

" He dared not hope you would come to his house — and he had reasons why he could not attend you in person here."

Their eyes met, and both laughed.

" You're very brave, Mr. Crawford, to venture all alone into the clutches of the witch."

Above her head the shaded lights threw her form into clear relief, evoking from her complexion and soft hair the suggestion of some pic-

ture in most delicate *matte* texture, or some view seen through an atmosphere still sparkling from recent rain.

He grew suddenly serious. " I am already bewitched," he replied.

She looked at him curiously; then, changing colour, quickly lowered her eyes. He did not break the silence.

" Will you tell Baron Zsido," she said at last, " that we accept his invitation."

He bowed. " You will be under my safe-conduct."

She laughed lightly. " I'd forgotten I needed one."

Outside he could hear a muffled roar. He said nothing.

The Queen's eyes had begun to dance with amusement.

" Is the party to be *tête-à-tête?* "

" If you'll allow him the good fortune." Then, " His proposals are for your private ear."

" You know what they are? "

He nodded.

" I think I'd rather you didn't tell me."

A thought seemed to strike her, for she looked up with a sudden smile.

" I haven't even a coachman left. I'll have to take a cab."

" Baron Zsido's carriage will, of course, be at your disposal, whenever you wish." He hesitated. " It may be necessary to leave with some secrecy."

She frowned. " I don't skulk out of my Palace by back doors."

" The circumstances are exceptional. It would be arrant folly to do otherwise."

Again they both listened to the angry hum without.

" Why do they want to kill me? I'm not afraid."

" They are. Madam," he exclaimed suddenly, " will you believe this at least of myself and my troops, that — we keep our word. You are under our safe-conduct."

" I do believe it."

He bowed and took his leave.

" Good-bye, Mr. Crawford," she said.

She sat some time gazing thoughtfully after his tall, spruce figure as he walked out. Crawford at all times affected a strict correctness in dress. Then she leant back alone and waited. From their portraits round the walls the grim old Kiralyi kings stared down at their descendant.

The dome of the Parliament buildings hung silhouetted in indigo against the grey night sky, of which it might have been some component cloud edged with infinitely elaborate lacework,

so unsubstantial seemed its base lost in the shadows of the river shore, so integral its relation to the design of the upper air. Its darker shadow swayed lazily in the water. Crawford leant over the bridge gazing at it and at the myriad lights of the city twinkling unilluminatingly. It was long before he noticed François standing beside him.

" Once every hundred years," he murmured, " she enters into the body of one of her children, the Kiralyi, and for a whole century, I suppose, flows beautiful with the memory of that form."

" She will be free to-night," said François slowly.

Beneath them the river slid noiselessly by, saturated with that tremendous peace which precedes violent effort and agitation.

François was talking as if in a dream. " Once I blamed my Maker. He has created a desirer and

a desirable, and has turned to the desirer saying, 'Thou shalt not desire,' and to the desirable, 'Thou shalt not be desired.' But why blame Him? If it is His will to establish a paradox, He has a perfect right to will what He chooses. As I don't will that paradox, I fight against it. It is not my business to pry into the morality of His ordinances. Simply, I resist them."

"Yes, man's will may be weaker than God, but it can wrest from Him all beautiful things. After that — what matters?"

François looked at him sadly. "I'm sorry, Crawford."

The other shook his head. "I, too, think the Aella will be free."

"She has always been free, but that which was buried needed time to rise."

"Now it has risen." He was silent; then, turning to his companion, "Doesn't it always

seem to you God's most delightful miracle, that He puts mind and soul into the body of a young girl, that the flower, the passive delight of our eyes, is itself endowed with reason and self-determination? "

" I have never attempted to conceal my profound admiration for the Creator's handiwork," replied François.

A closed carriage rattled across the bridge. On its panels were emblazoned the magnificent Zsido arms.

" I feel hungry," said Crawford. " Will you dine with me at the Urbana? "

Chapter Ten

THE HÔTEL URBANA DID NOT FACE the river-front. It stood in a less aristocratic but gayer quarter of the town, rubbing shoulders with Herr Kraut's establishment and the railway station. Strangers passing through the city found it a useful *pied-à-terre*. The world's business was discussed daily over cigars in its lounge.

Baron Zsido presented an immaculate figure as he emerged from the cloak-room. He sank heavily into a chair, and ordered an *apéritif*. His circumstances brought back to his mind adventures of his youth. He felt like an old warrior returning after many years to the scene of former triumphs. Nor was the publicity of the coming

tête-à-tête altogether unpleasing. The creases of his white waistcoat heaved contentedly. He flicked his shirt front lightly with his pocket handkerchief.

He frowned when the waiter led Lulu up to him. She accorded badly with his present dreams. There were also other reasons why she was unwelcome.

" Well, what do you want? " he growled.

She was panting with suppressed emotion. " No, you didn't expect me, did you? I've served your turn. I can go and break my heart for all you care."

Her voice rose. People began to turn and look.

The Baron clenched his fist in annoyance. " Control yourself," he muttered fiercely. " You'd better sit down."

She took the chair to which he pointed.

" When you are quite calm," he proceeded, " perhaps you will explain your troubles to me more coherently."

" You mustn't be too hard on a poor girl." She was still trembling.

He ignored her.

At last she spoke whimpering. " Let me have Rupert back."

" I'm not a necromancer. According to your own account his destination is one for which return tickets are seldom issued." Then, as she brought out her handkerchief, " God alive, woman! You can't weep here."

" Oh, what have I done to deserve this? " she moaned. " I've always been a respectable girl."

The Baron turned. " Listen to me," he commanded firmly. " To-night I shall lay my terms before the Queen. One is that she should bring

His Royal Highness out of this foolish concealment."

"Yes, and marry him. I've heard."

"If he chooses to marry his cousin, I certainly shall not interfere."

Her throat swallowed convulsively. Lulu had a long throat.

"But," he proceeded with emphasis, "the Queen herself may prove intractable. I make no promises. I suggest — I merely suggest, mind you — that if you dine at this hotel to-night at a table well separate from my own, you may have cause afterwards to congratulate yourself that you were present."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," she cried.

"I shall do nothing for you unless it suits my plans," he grunted brutally.

She was compelled to rest satisfied with this

slender consolation. She rose, and hesitated, her eyes glinting with a timorous cunning.

" A poor girl finds it hard to dine at so expensive a hotel."

He pulled a bundle of notes from his pocket, and handed them to her irritably.

" Oh, take them and go! " he exclaimed. Then recollecting, " And keep well away from this lounge. My wife is coming to hear the result of my proposals. I don't advise you to meet her."

The dining-room of the Hôtel Urbana showed little trace of the crisis in which the city was plunged. Outwardly appeared nothing but the brightness, spotlessness, and order of a first-class restaurant. The band played jazz music, an odd couple or two danced in a circumscribed space in the centre of the floor. Only a slightly more perceptible hum behind the screen where

the waiters received the dishes, and a slight sprinkling of foreign uniforms among the guests betrayed that events were not altogether normal. The regular clientele were little affected by political changes in the city. Their citizenship was world-wide.

The stout, middle-aged man and his companion did not escape the attention of their neighbours at the surrounding tables. Not that their incongruity of age was any novelty here. The devotees of international commerce often entertained the fairer and more youthful products of the city in *parties à deux*. Nor that either evoked any special recognition. The sphere of the Hôtel Urbana concerned itself little with the city's notabilities. Perhaps, however, all were remarking on the taste and good fortune of the girl's elderly admirer. She felt their eyes fixed upon her and kept her own downcast. There was

a certain candour about the admiration registered on the left bank.

She did not appear very interested in her host's conversation. During the long intervals of silence she averted her face from him. Such moments were not unwelcome to the diners at the table behind the Baron's chair. About her profile, even in repose, lurked the suggestion of something elfin unconsciously meditating mischief.

" I wonder what she sees in him," one remarked.

" Money can buy anything," replied the other.

" As a joke, I consider it in the very worst of taste," the Baron was saying. " Your assertion is not only incredible but positively blasphemous."

A smile of uncontrollable amusement flickered across her mouth, but she said nothing.

He continued in some exasperation. " I have no time to waste on ceremony. Those are our terms. First, you will restore His Royal Highness, if you have to fetch him from hell itself; secondly, you will abdicate formally in his favour; thirdly, you will marry him as queen-consort unassociated in any way with his royal authority."

" And if I refuse? "

" The people are waiting outside to hear your reply."

He pointed to the window, where a waiter had drawn back the curtain for an instant to look out, hastily replacing it.

She turned and faced him. " Baron Zsido, you've taken away my palace, and my city, and my subjects. But I'll always be a queen, until you can make me do something which I know no queen would ever do. I shall go and tell my people that I've rejected your terms."

Before he could stop her, she had risen and walked to the window. It was a high French window leading on to a balcony. She opened it and walked through, thrusting aside the curtain. The Hôtel Urbana watched her in considerable surprise.

The street outside was packed with an immense crowd, stretching as far as she could see in either direction. Figures swarmed even up the lamp-posts, and the lamps, half effaced, cast strange shadows over the black, heaving mass beneath. Every one was ominously silent. Only when the Queen appeared upon the balcony a low murmur broke forth, then quickly subsided. They were waiting to hear what she would say. The window curtain remained caught where she had thrust it, and a flood of light poured out over her. A stray breeze played round the thin dress, which fell closely from her shoulders, curving

outwards at her knees like the drooping petals of a flower. Her voice rang clear through the stillness.

" We wish all our people to know," she said, " that we have been asked to release His Highness, our cousin, the Grand Duke Rupert, from the consequences of our royal displeasure — and do other things. We have decided not to grant this petition."

There was a pause. Then a howl of fury broke from the mob, and they surged towards the building.

" Witch! Witch! " they cried. " Throw her down! Give us the witch! " and like a great tide they poured through the windows and doors of the ground floor into the hotel. Locks and bars burst in every direction beneath the weight of the entire multitude. The Queen stepped back into the dining-room.

The guests had risen in panic. Some had rushed to the door, but seeing what was coming up the stairs returned hurriedly. The waiters had fled along the passage connecting with the kitchen. Observing this, the guests followed suit. Soon the Queen was alone in the room with the Baron and Lulu. She stood motionless in the centre of the floor. Lulu walked up to her. " So I wasn't good enough for you or your Kiralyi, was I? " she exclaimed. " I was a low, common woman. Ah, wait till you feel what lowness and commonness really mean in this city! We'll see who's the prostitute now, my girl."

The Queen did not reply, and Lulu ran to the head of the stairs.

" Men of the city," she called, " come and rid yourselves of this sorceress. How much longer will you bear with her whoredoms and deviltries? "

The crowd had hesitated at the first floor, uncertain how to proceed. A great shout greeted Lulu's words, and their boots clattered on the marble of the next flight.

" Follow me, Lulu," she shrieked above the tumult, " the poor daughter of the people, whom this wanton ordered her cousin to seduce."

They picked up the name as a war-cry. " Lulu, Lulu! " they shouted.

Baron Zsido had a sudden inspiration. He did not wish his own services to be belittled hereafter. Hurrying out on to the landing in the face of the foremost insurgents, " Men of the city," he cried, " the girl Aella Kiralyi is deposed, and I, Baron Zsido, proclaim Rupert and Lulu King and Queen."

" Lulu, Queen Lulu! " they responded, and burst into the room.

Crawford and François had dined in a dis-

tant corner by the waiter's screen. They did not wish to be remarked. François was hardly a companion likely to increase the Baron's confidence in his ally at such a moment. Both had smiled grimly when they heard the Queen's speech from the balcony. They rose and passed into the back passage. The waiters did not appear surprised. The panic had not yet begun.

Their movements were purposeful. They seemed to know these passages well. In a cul-de-sac in the servants' quarter of the hotel they found the detachment of soldiers waiting. Arms were provided for both.

The utmost consternation was caused among the outflowing rout of guests, when figures baring cold steel came filing swiftly to meet them. The corridor was narrow, and the soldiers ruthlessly determined to pass. International finance had to dispense with the services of its most dis-

tinguished practitioners for many weeks to come.

The crowd recoiled an instant, discovering that the Queen was no longer alone. Then the pressure of those behind, who had not seen, propelled irresistibly forward those in front, who had. The soldiers were piling a barricade of tables and chairs, sweeping the hotel cloths, crockery, and plate impatiently in a litter on the floor. They had persuaded the Queen to stand back out of danger. Over this unfinished barrier the battle now swayed. Bayonet and discipline struggled against sheer number armed with knives, scrap-iron, or rough wooden clubs. A few shots were fired, but at such close quarters there was little time to load. Lulu herself led the mob like a fury of war. She was showing a quite exceptional physical courage.

Now the weight of numbers was making it-

self felt. Figures dripping with blood trampled the frail tables into matchwood. The oncoming tide broke over the barricades, and uniform and ragged coat struggled hand to hand in an indiscriminate confusion throughout the length and breadth of the room.

Aella felt herself seized violently. She thrust the assailant from her.

" Don't," he said. " You must come at once. It's the only chance."

Looking up, she recognized Crawford.

" What do you want me to do? "

" I'm going to take you out of this."

" Why should I run away? "

" You risk all our lives by staying here. If you go, we can."

He led her through the press, sheltering her beneath his tall form. They were hidden amid the combatants as in a wood. Occasionally some

bravo would recognize her as she pushed past, and reach out at her with a gasp of triumph. But Crawford's arm seemed always to be interposed.

"The Queen!" Lulu was crying. "Take the Queen alive!" but in the tremendous din her voice was drowned, and few had the attention to spare for aught else than self-defence.

The passage was deserted, and a corner now cut off the noise. Crawford let go her arm, and they walked together in silence. They met no one in the back quarters of the hotel. All had fled. At the little door opening on to the street she turned to him.

"Mr. Crawford, you've persuaded me to be a coward, but — I want to thank you for twice saving my life."

"And for bringing you all your troubles."

"Don't be silly. You had to do that."

He looked at her with sudden gratitude. " Thank you," he replied — " so much."

" You've taught a foreign queen that the men of your country — keep their word."

" It wasn't only because you were under our safe-conduct."

She did not reply. He hesitated.

" You must go back to your soldiers," she said.

" I shall first see you to our Legation. You'll be safe there."

She looked at him proudly. " This is my city. I don't hide from it on foreign ground."

" But where will you go? "

The old legends came flooding back to his mind. There was a strange light sparkling in her eyes. He wondered if he understood its meaning.

" You mustn't leave your soldiers," she said. " You have a duty to them."

He paused. " Yes, you are right," he replied.

She held out her hand. " Good-bye, Mr. Crawford."

He stooped and kissed it. " Good-bye, Your Majesty " — then to himself, " Good-bye, Aella."

She seemed to hear his last words, because she smiled at him with infinite sadness.

He watched her light figure walk calmly down the dark, narrow street. Then he hurried back to the pandemonium upstairs.

The Baroness and Passmore did not move while the city swept past through the lounge. No one troubled them. A few, recognizing her, even cheered. The Zsido star was in the ascendant.

" The girl has refused," she remarked. " Ferdinand was right."

" What'll happen now? " asked Passmore.

She was not listening. She had heard the

crowd take up Lulu's name as a war-cry, and frowned anxiously. Passmore, following her example, strung his nerves to hear what was passing above them. Again through the clamour came the name " Lulu," coupled with another word. " Lulu, Queen Lulu! " cried the voices. The Baroness rose distractedly, and took a few steps towards the staircase.

" They're making that creature Queen," she exclaimed.

Passmore had risen too. He did not know what action she proposed to take. But he felt extremely brave.

Baron Zsido himself was coming down to meet them. He intended to resume the direction of affairs when they became less tumultuous. The Baron was not built to be a man of war.

" Béla," cried his wife, " go and stop them,

or they'll crown the creature before our very eyes."

He spread out his hands helplessly. " As I haven't Her late Majesty's talent for black magic, events must take their course. I'm not going back into that death-trap."

" Will you let all our working and plotting end like this? "

" The accident may not be unfortunate. If Lulu must be Queen, it was Baron Zsido who first cried ' Queen Lulu.' "

She turned on him fiercely. " Remember that I am a Kiralyi."

" It is a relationship, my dear, that for your safety's sake I should advise you to forget."

" Mr. Passmore," she exclaimed, " will you too bow down and serve this woman? "

For answer he leapt towards the stairs. " She shall never be queen, Baroness, if I can stop it."

The Baron smiled sardonically. " A foolish young man. I wish you joy of him, Marie."

Passmore did not reach the dining-room. At the door he was flung back by a rush of humanity. The soldiers were retreating towards the staircase. He pressed close against the wall to let them pass, having no wish to be trampled under foot.

As they swept by, he recognized François. Their eyes met, and he shrank away, taken by surprise. Conscience was already beginning to exhume certain carefully smothered memories.

The other smiled grimly, and stopped. " I'm not going to hurt you," he said with some scorn. " I'd rather you did the work yourself. You'll never forget."

Passmore opened his mouth. There was so much he might have explained if there had been time. But time there was not. Already François

was isolated in the mob, which pressed close on the soldiers' heels.

Some had recognized him. " The witch's spy," they howled. " The evil spirit! " and rushed at him, greedy for blood.

Passmore slipped hurriedly away while he could, running downstairs in the wake of the soldiers. At the foot of the first flight he looked back. François was defending himself with a slim rapier. But every minute his enemies closed thicker upon him. Passmore turned, and hastened on. The Baroness was loyally waiting for him in the lounge. He felt humiliated that he should have put her to this danger. She made no allusion to his errand, and they passed safely out into the street.

Reinforcements for the soldiers were arriving, as news of the disturbance spread through the city. They prepared to storm the hotel. The

Baroness led Passmore into a side-lane. She was uncertain what would now be the attitude of the foreign troops. Nor did she wish to meet the triumphant Lulu. She was preoccupied, and did not seem to hear the remarks which from time to time he felt it incumbent to make.

" I'd rather the whole city was annihilated," she muttered at last.

A full moon was rising above the hills up-river. From the street where they now walked they could watch it poised on the ridge-top like a great plate. There was sorcery in the air. It seemed to hover as though held by some influence to the earth. The city lay bleached in its radiance. Across the pavement the shadows of houses fell black as pitch. The Baroness and Passmore drew quickly into a dark alley-mouth, seeing the Queen approaching them.

She appeared to glide, rather as spirit than

living flesh. Through the soft, grained light the outlines of her form came diffused and indistinct, as though she were moving in a radiance half opaque. The light wisps of her dress and her bare shoulders melted, an incarnation hardly more material, into the brightness that saturated the city. Passmore shuddered.

" She is going to the tunnel," murmured the Baroness. There was a tremor in her voice.

The figure passed them unconsciously. In her eyes shone a calm, set purpose. A chance movement threw a gleam of moonlight upon her necklace of fine gold beads. It bore as a pendant a golden key.

The Baroness's form suddenly stiffened, as though seized by an overmastering idea. Her words sounded strange and husky with excitement. " Get me that key," she whispered.

Passmore looked at her appalled. " I can't

rob her," he blurted out. "I can't. She's all alone."

The Queen had already passed some way down the street.

"Go after her — now — quick! Get it," said the Baroness, thrusting him forward.

He went, hating himself, hardly realizing why he obeyed.

Chapter Eleven

IN THE DAYS OF HER FREEDOM THE Aella had romped through the hills in a series of cataracts, bursting at last with wild glee out on to the plain. This was unfortunate for the plain. It ran constant risk of inundation. Such had not pleased the builders of the city. They had dammed the Aella sternly into her hill valleys in a great lake, from which she was only allowed to issue soberly and in prescribed bulk. The dam was the work of a famous engineer. The city considered it the eighth wonder of the world. It was composed of two massive gates. The water escaped through a passage, whose aperture might be regulated at will. In time of emergency the main gates

themselves could be opened to let loose the river on the plain. But they had remained locked since the day they were built. The key was an emblem of the city's royalty. It never left the sovereign's person. It was a small golden toy ridiculously disproportionate to the mechanism which it had power to unloose.

The engineer did not live long to enjoy his triumph. It was said that he found favour in the eyes of the King's daughter. Kiralyi princesses had never needed to offer their favours twice. But the King, her father, counted little the strength of the temptation. It was the Kiralyi's pride that had stained their Palace with blood. When at last they let him die, it was whispered that the man had laid a curse upon his masterpiece; it should one day bring ruin on the city for the sake of a daughter of their kings.

The Baroness ordered the taxi to wait by the lake shore. The man obeyed. He could conceive only one object capable of inspiring the lady and her youthful admirer to take a moonlit walk in this desolate spot. It was no business of his to interfere, but he reflected sadly on the iniquity of the upper class. He held evangelical views.

Neither the Baroness nor Passmore spoke as they approached the dam. Once he hesitated. He had glanced down at the city, throned like a queen upon the Palace rock in the garden of the plain. Little points and roofs caught the sheen of the moonlight, but over the dense low-lying quarter on the left bank fell the shadow of the cliff. A few solitary lamps glittered, though at this hour most had been extinguished. Like a ribbon of silver the river wound away to the horizon.

" I don't think I can," he said.

She took no notice, but walked on.

At the great gates they stopped. She handed him the key in silence.

" You put all the responsibility on to me," he exclaimed bitterly.

She stamped her foot impatiently. " How can a Kiralyi destroy the city of her fathers? — but the city must be destroyed."

" Why? It's so beautiful."

" Then its beauty shall never be prostituted."

He gazed at it again, the city of beauty, the city of sin, shimmering beneath him. The night breeze seemed to waft up from it a perfume of pleasure and desire and the horror beyond desire. He thought of secret memories festering beneath its loveliness, and with a pang his own memories came wounding back.

"Water that washes all things clean!" he murmured. He fitted the key into the lock.

It turned easily, setting in motion a series of mechanisms that connected eventually with the giant bolt. The Baroness drew him away. He looked back. Already the gates were swinging open, slowly, very slowly, beneath the pressure of the entire lake. He hid his face in his hands. A voice — not François' — was repeating in his brain, "You'll never forget. You'll never forget."

When they reached the road their taxi-driver had fled. This was not the commandment he had expected them to break.

* * *

AELLA sat at the knees of her ancestress, leaning her head against the bare marble, and gazing

expectantly up the river. Some instinct had led her here. Now she was waiting for she knew not what.

She loved to sit and look at the water hurrying by. It had a purposefulness, an utter unself-consciousness, that filled her with peace and strength. She opened all the senses of her soul, surrendering herself to be absorbed into its influence.

The eyes of the statue too seemed to be waiting, as they had waited for many hundreds of years. There was a strange, a startling resemblance between these two forms brought so close together. The moonlight shed over both the same silver tone. They might have been twin sisters carved one kneeling above the other, or two impressions of the same model which the sculptor's whim had juxtaposed.

Aella looked up without surprise at François

standing beside her. " I want your help a second time," she said at last, very quietly.

He was silent.

" François," she went on, " I want to be — I want my river to be free to-night. Will you do this for me? I ask you, knowing what it must — "

He interrupted her. " Don't, Aella," he exclaimed almost roughly, as though the words hurt him. " There's no need. Look! "

He pointed up the river. Away beyond the city as far as the distant hills the panorama stretched clear as by daylight, but transfused and etherealized with the quality of night. All the windings of the river lay revealed. Along them seemed to sweep a cloud of disturbance, ruffling and obscuring the mirror that had glittered to the moon. As it drew nearer they distinguished a great wave, a cliff of piled water, rushing upon

the city. Already it overhung the uttermost houses.

"The dam!" exclaimed the Queen. "They've unlocked the gates."

He glanced at her neck. "Where's the key?"

She hesitated. "He stole it."

His eyes rested on the menace towering above them. In its wake buildings swirled like card-houses caught by a gust of wind.

"The river is free," he said, "but its freedom has destroyed your city."

"Why did he do it?"

"Remorse had to be drowned. We've all done things for your sake, Aella. Another has taken your wish out of my hands."

She met his eyes frankly, without fear or concealment.

" I'm not glad," she replied. " François, I wanted you to help me — a second time."

The city was hidden from them. A crest of water foamed high above the bridge, high above their heads. The moon quivered distorted through a roof of mother-of-pearl. He picked her up lightly in his arms, and carried her into the tunnel.

A NOTE ON THE TYPE IN WHICH THIS BOOK IS SET

This book is set on the Linotype in Garamond, a modern rendering of the type first cut in the sixteenth century by Claude Garamond (1510-1561). He was a pupil of Geofroy Tory and is believed to have based his letters on the Venetian models although he introduced a number of important differences, and it is to him we owe the letter which we know as Old Style. He gave to his letters a certain elegance and a feeling of movement which won for their creator an immediate reputation and the patronage of the French King, Francis I.

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